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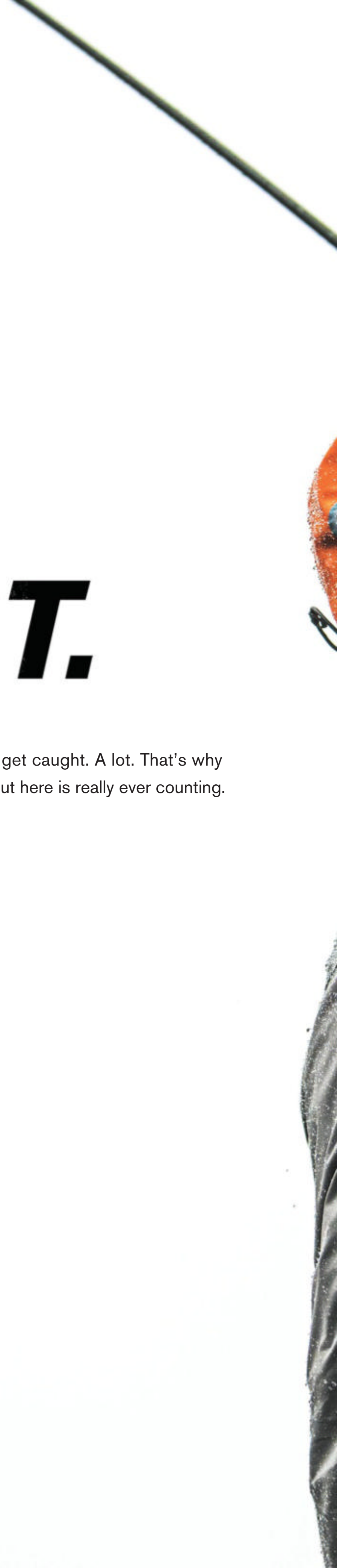

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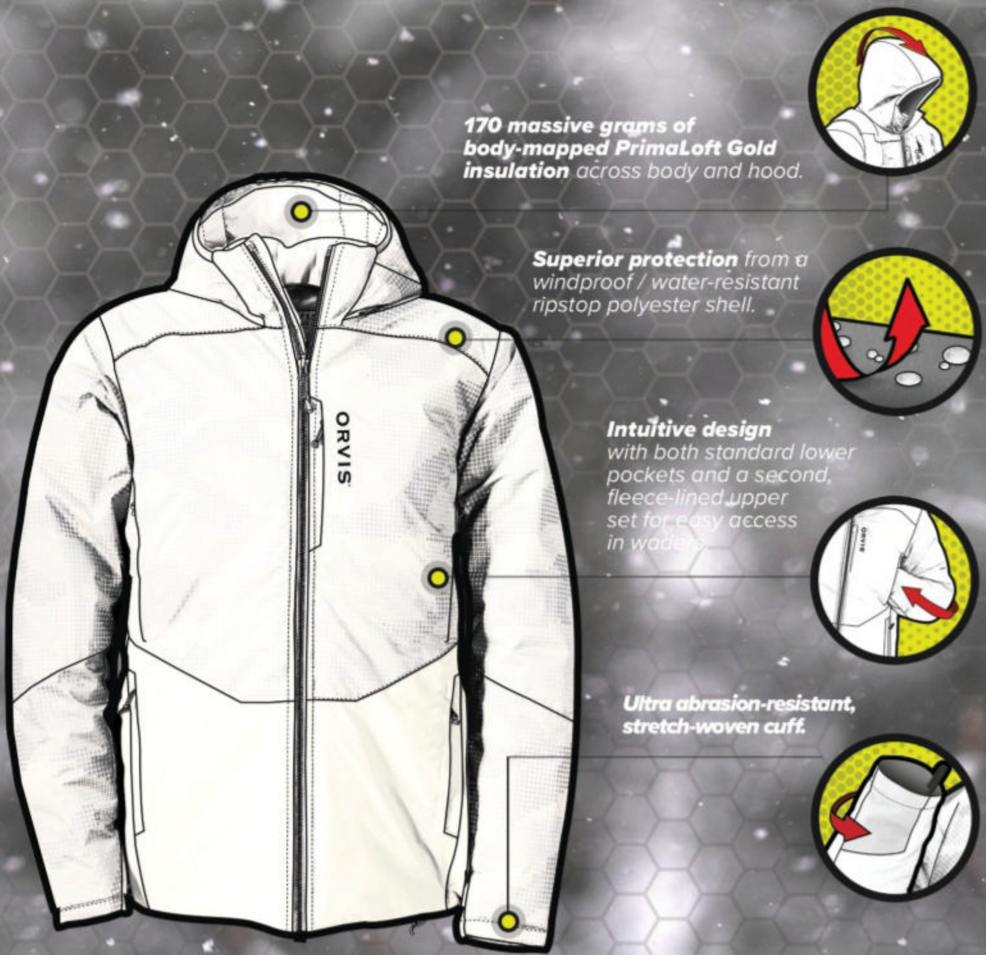

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Features

64 **Spruces**
If trees could talk, they'd teach us about fish and rivers and fires. Maybe they'd even teach us about each other.
Story by George Rogers

72 **Angling with Van Gogh**
The secret to fishing England's private water is to be rich. Or to know someone who is. Or to play the dumb Yank.
Story by Parker Bauer

80 **The Paper Hanger**
Blueprint for a successful writer: start college in your forties, know how to scrub decks, be a wallpaper guy.
Story by Dave Zoby

86 **Allegheny River Stories**
Appreciate the tailwater fishing below Kinzua Dam. Because Seneca Nation paid one hell of a price for it.
Story by Matt Dunn

WINTER ROOSTER. BAJA.
PHOTO: DYLAN SCHMITZ

URBAN TARPON IN PUERTO RICO.
PHOTO BY NICK PRICE

Departments

14 **Put-in**
Mexico's two peninsulas

21 **Rises**
Winter is a time for reflection...

22 **Scuddlebutt**
What the hell happened in Bolivia?; one American in Russia; creative bug-art; build your own bamboo; big stripers in Quebec; TU teams with the Forest Service; and flyfishing is *way* older than we thought

46 **Tippets**
Jersey winters; your disloyal rod; 9-weight tomato stake; juvie-tarpon lessons in Mexico; coming out and muscle loss; and a guardian angel on Kodiak

58 **Rodholders**
When fishing with Matt Mendes on the Warm Springs Reservation, bring your big-boy waders.
By Eric Johnson

62 **Redspread**
Brays Island, South Carolina, for redfish *and* bass.
By Tom Bie

94 **City Limits**
Great Falls, Montana, has seen its share of tragedy and heartache. But the Missouri is always there.
By Brady Schwertfeger

104 **Permit Page**
Whats all this talk about No Name Lodge?
By Joseph Evans

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T&T Ambassador Alec Gerbec on the Snake River Wyoming

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Mexico's Peninsulas

There are thirty-eight nonstop routes to Cancun, Mexico, from the United States. In June, nearly eight hundred flights landed there from Houston and Dallas alone. In 2022, the combined number of passengers arriving at the Cancun and Los Cabos airports was just shy of thirty-four million—a nearly twenty percent increase from the previous high set in 2019. Eighty-one percent of these passengers are Americans, and *ninety*-one percent of them will leave neither city during their stay. Many won't even leave their hotel.

Fervent flyfishers are notoriously prone to making poor decisions. From relationships to careers to coming home for dinner, we are particularly susceptible when faced with any choice that falls along the fish-now-but-pay-for-it-later continuum. But every flyfisher at every level understands that the beauty and magnificence of Mexico doesn't start when you arrive in Cancun or Cabo; it starts when you leave them. In this travel-obsessed, Instagram-influenced world, fly anglers truly are the one-percenters (or nine-percenters, as the case may be) of wise decision-makers.

A word about Mexico in general: Watch or listen to national news, and you'll hear about gangs and violence and drug cartels and our immigration concerns. Legitimate problems, no doubt: Murder rates in Mexico are far higher than those in the U.S. What you don't hear is that the homicide rate in Mexico *against Americans* is less than half the homicide rate in the U.S. against Americans.

The sad, not-very-well-hidden truth in this statistic—particularly in terms of drug-related crimes in Mexico—is that Americans aren't the target, we're the market.

The U.S. State Department has four categories of Travel Advisories, from Level 1 (Austria, Norway) to Level 4 (Iraq, Ukraine). There are thirty-two states in Mexico, and the two peninsulas hold five of them: Baja California and Baja California Sur on the Baja Peninsula; and Quintana Roo, Campeche, and Yucatán on the Yucatán Peninsula. Luckily for flyfishers, two of those three are currently at Level 1: Campeche and Yucatán. Quintana Roo is Level 2, which simply suggests using "increased caution." Why? Because Quintana Roo is home to Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Riviera Maya, and Tulum—all the cheesy yet more dangerous places you'll pass on your way down to bonefish and permit flats.

I don't mean to make light of crime; all of us should be cautious wherever we travel. But my *personal* experiences in Mexico, involving some forty trips, most between four and six days, have shown the Mexican people to be perhaps the friendliest folks on Earth. Warm, funny, helpful, genuine, caring people. Their culture, food, music, tequila, traditions… their *attitude*. It all mixes so well with roosterfish and bonefish and every species in between.

I'm not big on bucket lists or a tally of New Year's rezzies, but if you are, then a proper visit to one—better yet, both—of Mexico's fishy peninsulas should be on them.—*T.B.*

JIM KLIUG (MEXICO)

The Drake

2022 VERSION 24.4

When a trout chooses to prey upon what
he thinks is weaker than himself, the
angler ought not to be blamed for it.
—GEORGE WASHINGTON BETHUNE (1847)

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COVER: Jon Engle scouts for steel in northern British Columbia. Photo by Chris Bone

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CAN WE STOP KEEPING SCORE?

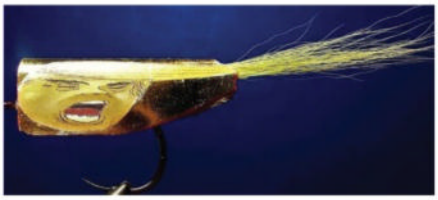
It *is* time for a slow-fishing movement, and Stephen Sautner's story ("Numbers Game," Fall '22) was a refreshing break from the how-many-and-how-big flyfishing mentality. We all should step back and appreciate the beauty of our sport. Sautner hit it out of the park!

Dick Watts, West Richland, WA

TRUMP FILES! ER... TRUMP *FLIES*

After reading the piece in your Summer '22 issue regarding "The Trumpy" humpy-style dry fly, I had to send you my variation on the Capt. Joe Blados Crease Fly: The Donald J. Trump Crease Fly—saltwater companion pattern to The Trumpy. I developed it more as a gag than anything, but I did find that, while most stripers took this fly gently, all bluefish absolutely demolished it—they hated it! I can only surmise that the blues were probably Democrats!

Captain Jim Barr, Newport, RI



ABOUT THOSE LEAD WEIGHTS...

I found your opinion piece ("Questionable Criticism," Fall '22) very interesting. Who at ASA is responsible for this rather surprising support of lead pollution? Is it their president, Glenn Hughes, or does the responsibility lie with their Board or sponsors? Mr. Hughes was interviewed in *Marlin* magazine in 2019. When asked what legacy he would like to leave behind, Hughes replied, "When I retire, I'd like to know I left the water cleaner than when I got here." And yet we have this.

Jeff Ransdell, Indianapolis, IN

GREAT USE OF A MEAGER PAYCHECK

I've been meaning to thank you for the much appreciated and unexpected royalty check for my last story. I figured the best thing to do would be to invest it, so I cashed it and sent it off to my local Trout Unlimited chapter. I'm hoping to see some dividends in the form of a streambed restoration project soon.

Scott Ferguson, San Francisco, CA

DRAKECAST ON THE FORD NIGHTSHIFT

I love y'alls magazine and was happy when I discovered my local Orvis had them. But I found you guys through the Drakecast, and it saddened me when it disappeared in 2021. So glad it's back, they make this nightshifter's nights oh so much better when I'm building the nation's number one truck!

Stephen Bunch, Louisville, KY

DIGGING THE RAFT-DROP COVER

That photo on the Summer '22 issue was the best cover of any magazine I've seen in a long time. (Harrison Anglers' raft-launch through bushes in Western Mass.) It perfectly captures the magic of what's going on up here compared to other fisheries. Congrats!

trashfactory2.0 (Instagram)

ALASKA: NO PROBLEM WITH ACCESS

I was happy to see you addressing and explaining a variety of stream-access issues. ("Public Mistrust Doctrine," Winter '21-22). Great work there. We're lucky to have constitutionally guaranteed stream access in Alaska. The rest of the country is unfortunately starting to look more and more like Europe—private water and pay to play.

George Rogers, Broad Pass, AK

LOVE FOR LARRY LEVINE

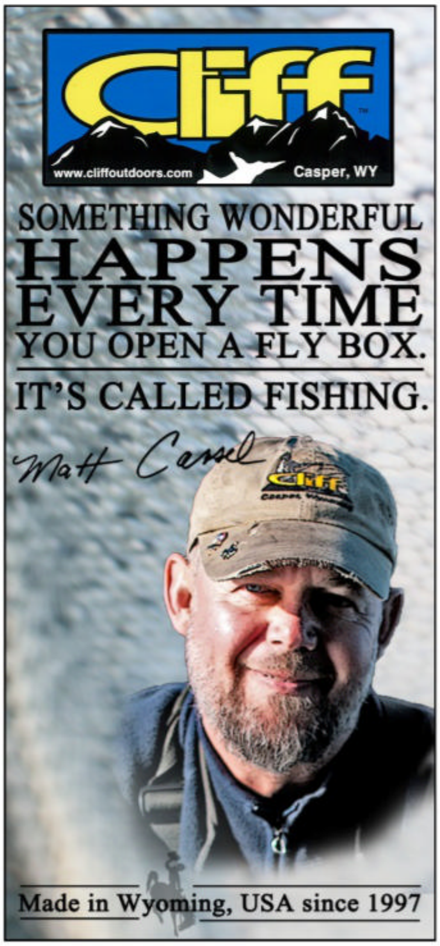
Thank you for the well-written, rich story about Larry Levine. ("Losing Larry," Fall '22.) After reading it, I had to call Dave Hall. Then I went to check in my fishing library for the unbound copy of Larry's novel, *Timber Town*. I kept it in the original mailer he sent it to me in. I read it back then and need to read it again. Next to it was a charred (all the edges are black) copy of Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler*, with an inscription from 1884. It is also in its original mailer, a special gift from David Duncan. Those two books probably kept each other company.

Jerry Swanson, Portland, OR

PROPS FROM THE SALMONFLY PROJECT

Thanks for featuring our organization in the latest issue. ("Salmonfly Questions," Fall '22). Great job on it. It's exciting to be getting the word out.

Jackson Birrell, Missoula, MT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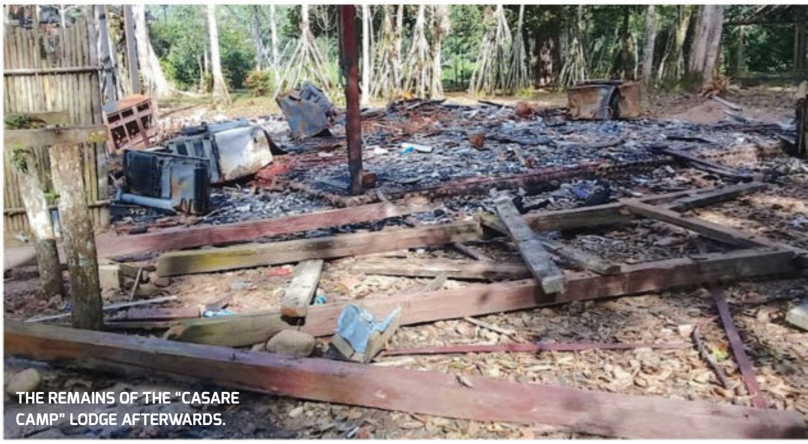
ANGLING FRONTIERS' LODGE BEFORE THE FIRE ON MAY 25.



THE REMAINS OF THE "CASARE CAMP" LODGE AFTERWARDS.

Firestorm

What really happened in Bolivia? BY TOM BIE

THE FIRST EMAIL arrived on July 14. "Reaching out to pass along some fresh 'industry happenings' from the heart of Bolivia's golden dorado region," it began. "I figured the Drake might be interested in looking into it."

The "happenings" had occurred nearly two months earlier, on May 25, when the Angling Frontiers (AF) lodge owned by Bolivian-born and Dallas-based outfitters Patrick Taendler and Federico Marancenbaum was burned to the ground in the Bolivian jungle. One might assume that this initial email, along with the stream of texts, in-person probing, and inquisitive phone calls that followed it, would've all been asking the same two-part question: Who did this, and why? But the question many were asking was far more specific: Was AF's torched lodge the work, directly or indirectly, of competing outfitter Marcelo Perez, owner of Untamed Angling (UA), and the man known to be Angling Frontiers' sole adversary in the fight to sell pricey South America flyfishing trips?

"This seems like the unfortunate climax to a long history of sabotages between Bolivia's two dorado operators," the email continued. "With the 'hearsay' culprit in this case being Untamed Angling. And now, UA has an unchallenged monopoly in the country."

Flyfishing-community chatter about the incident tapered off for a few weeks in mid-summer. But speculation exploded again on Sept. 5, when Angling Frontiers made an accusatory Instagram post showing photos of its burnt lodge along the Maniqui River, which they call "Casare Camp." Neither Perez nor Untamed Angling is named directly, but anyone familiar with the Bolivian market for dorado trips knows that there was bad blood and unhealthy competition between the two.

AF's post received more than a hundred supportive comments, including a few of the "we know who did this" variety. Without naming a suspect, the Sept. 5 diatribe placed blame not only on "the competition" but on any person or company in the flyfishing industry choosing to support that competition: *"Unethical competitors become a toxic and cancerous presence that continue to grow due to support they get from some members of the industry who may not even know they are contributing to an operator that engages in immoral and even criminal behavior,"* the post reads. *"This support fuels the unethical competitor and perpetuates the damage they cause to countless people and even to areas that would otherwise be protected by some other ethical operation."*

The post made one thing clear: Taendler and Marancenbaum view Angling Frontiers as ethical and their competition as unethical. What's less clear is whether this is accurate. How is AF viewed beyond those posting positive vibes on its social page? Specifically, what opinions of Angling Frontiers are held by the indigenous Tsimane people living near its base in the Beni department of Bolivia? AF's impassioned Instagram post addressed this question in the final comment: "Our relationship with our indigenous partners was going strong as always."

BUT WAS IT? In October 2018, following a series of inspections by government officials, an eviction notice was posted at Casare Camp, informing Angling Frontiers that its lodge was built on public land owned by the state. The notice was authorized by Eloy Poma, Director of Land Administration for the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA), after Poma had received a written complaint the previous month from the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (CIDOB).

"INRA" and "CIDOB" both hold considerable power in Bolivia. INRA is a multi-branched arm of the Ministry of Rural Development and Lands, somewhat akin to the U.S. Department of Interior—if the Interior Department handed over huge swaths of land to Native Americans. Not only does INRA manage *access* to land, but since 1993 it also oversees a government program granting ownership of certain lands to indigenous communities. Lands that, for example, are near several indigenous villages. In other words, the exact category of land that Angling Frontiers' camp was sitting on.

As for CIDOB, it is the national organization representing Bolivia's lowland (not in the Andes) indigenous groups. Maybe you've read about the many indigenous marches "for autonomy and rights" that have taken place in Bolivia over the past thirty years. CIDOB organizes and coordinates these marches.

Point being: AF's eviction notice was not served by some overweight slumlord slapping a hand-written sticky note on a double-wide. CIDOB and INRA are groups to be reckoned with.

"We have a written complaint from CIDOB, dated Sept. 13 of this year, against Patrick F. Taendler, legal representative of the tourism company Angling Frontiers," Poma read from a statement that appeared on the Bolivian news site, *EL DEBER*.

ANGLING FRONTIERS INSTAGRAM

"We have notified and communicated to these people that they must leave these public lands within ten days. Otherwise, we have the power to take corresponding legal actions."

For indigenous communities, corresponding legal actions include the option of "community justice"—essentially, any equitable punishment not provided by the ordinary justice system. Bolivia incorporated these community-justice laws into its larger legal system more than thirty years ago, on the grounds that the ordinary system doesn't extend to the country's most remote areas. (Barely half of Bolivia's smaller towns have judges, and less than a quarter have prosecutors.)

Prior to 2009, community judicial proceedings could still be overruled by the ordinary system, and prosecutors would sometimes seek charges against indigenous authorities for carrying out their judgments. That changed with the 2009 Constitution (Bolivia's *17th* since declaring independence from Spain in 1825) The new version—backed by Evo Morales, then Bolivia's first indigenous president—removed the ability for the ordinary system to review or alter community-justice decisions.

To be clear: Angling Frontiers had the necessary permissions to run its operation. They had signed a contract in 2012 with *Gran Concejo Chiman* (Great Tsimane Council), which controls a nearly million-acre area called "TICH"—*Territorio Indígena Chiman.* TICH is a TCO, or *Tierra Comunitaria de Origen,* which translates to "Communal Lands of Origin." TCOs are owned via collective title by their respective indigenous groups, and are the lands that INRA verifies and awards. AF's original contract was renewed in 2016 and included more than 2,500 words detailing the agreement, from the term (twenty years), to the Indigenous communities involved (Naranjalito, Pachene, and Cuchisama), to its area of operation: upper Maniqui River and its tributaries.

It was this sometimes gray "area of operation" that initiated Angling Frontiers' trouble with Perez, who was no idle bystander to AF's legal issues. Untamed Angling joined *its* partners, the *High Secure Indigenous Association,* in a 2018 complaint denouncing AF for taking what Perez says were illegal trips inside "TIPNIS" (Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory), where UA operates. The uppermost headwaters to the Maniqui clearly sit inside TIPNIS, and if Angling Frontiers took trips on those waters, they would've needed permission from—and a separate agreement with—the *High Secure Indigenous Association.* An agreement that AF didn't have.

The denouncement from Perez, whether accurate or not, does hint at what may have been AF's biggest challenge all along, at least from a logistical and operational standpoint: The dorado were typically a long ways upriver. Several trip reports from AF's early customers, while praising the fishing overall, also question the time and distance required to reach it. This is partly why AF's initial contract included an agreement to build an airstrip: *"With the help of the communities of the Tsimane Indigenous Nation, Associate 2 [AF] commits to build a natural airstrip in the vicinity of the Tsimane Cuchisama Indigenous Community, to be used for the transfer of tourists." (*Notably, nothing in the contract outlined similar plans or a location for building a base camp.)

Late 2018 became a pivotal time for Angling Frontiers. On Dec. 5, following the Perez complaint and the INRA eviction, representatives from CIDOB—who'd by then been waiting three months for AF to comply with its eviction notices—filed a criminal complaint with the prosecutor's office at the Public Ministry, allowing the prosecutor's office to "investigate the illegal actions regarding the subjugation of land."

Yet the most meaningful move from Angling Frontiers had occurred three weeks earlier, on Nov. 16, when it signed a new operational contract—not with The Great Tsimane Council, but with the three Tsimane communities the Council oversees: The Cuchisama, the Naranjalit, and the Pachene.

Indeed, AF's trespassing charges were dropped by the Public Ministry ten months later, due to "a legal obstacle in presenting an indictment." (According to court documents, INRA had failed to get statements from the defendants.) But AF's new contract seemed likely to cause more trouble than any eviction. How would the Great Tsimane Council feel about being cut out?

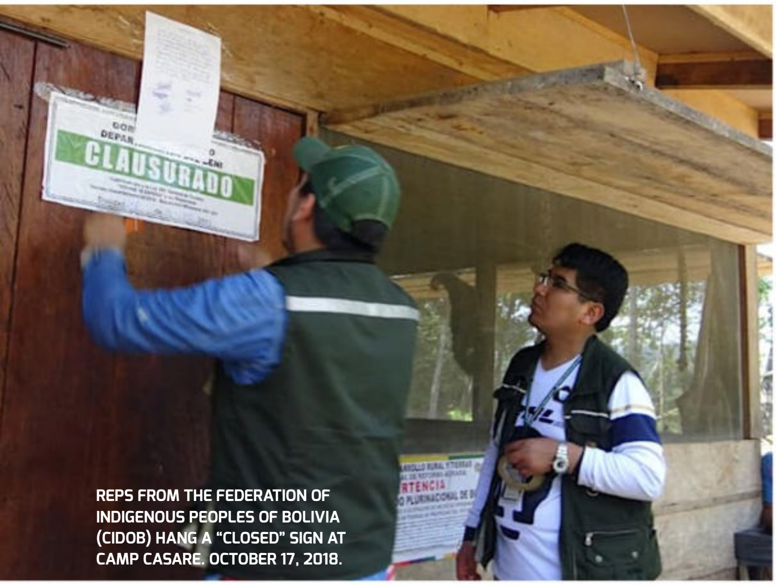
Taendler blames Perez not only for burning his lodge, but also for most of his legal troubles in Bolivia, claiming that Perez wants a monopoly in the country and will stop at nothing to get it, even if this requires giving incentives to public officials. Six months spent researching this story revealed no evidence to support Taendler's assertions about Perez. But they didn't uncover any evidence that would prove him wrong, either.

Taendler *has* shown a knack for attracting controversy on his own, though. According to a 2015 story in *El Guardián Beniano*, a San Borja-based tour operator named Jhonny Leigue had signed a ten-year agreement in March 2012 with the *Gran Concejo Chiman* to be the exclusive provider of sportfishing tours in TICH. So, Leigue was naturally surprised to learn that a second "exclusive" agreement had also been signed, after his, "with Angling Frontiers, to exploit the same Sport Fishing Circuit."

Taendler emerged victorious from the feud, but not before the *El Guardián* shared a few unflattering details about AF's contract: "*The agreement with Angling Frontiers was modified in January 2015 with clauses totally contrary to the rights of the noble Tsimane people, prohibiting work in said area for indigenous people living as tourist guides and forcing them to participate in other tasks without remuneration, prohibiting them from partaking even in the traditional fishing they carry out for their subsistence, and worse, including a confidentiality clause, wanting to hide the harmfulness of this agreement." (*AF has long been secretive about aspects of its operation. In a 2014 story in *Lone Star Outdoor News,* Lili Keys writes, "As for the region, Marancenbaum simply referred to it as 'Casare.' He prefers to keep the exact location under wraps.")

AF's struggles culminated in a trip to Casare Camp on May 20, 2022—five days before the fire—by another INRA commission. This time, the officials hadn't come just to hang a notice. Instead, they "verbally ordered the person in charge of the place [AF employee Fernando Ortiz] to leave peacefully."

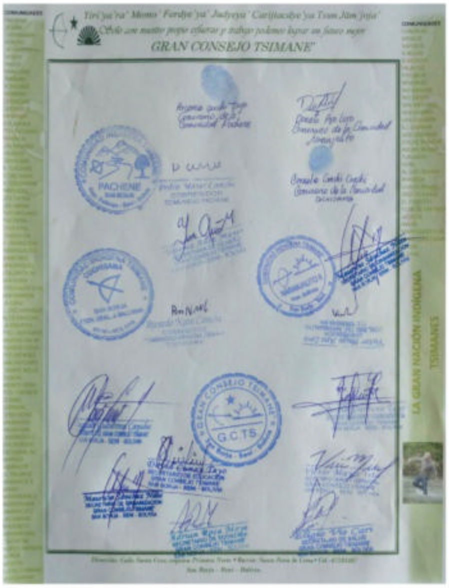
Over the course of more than five hours of WhatsApping with Taendler, I found myself very much believing that he came



REPS FROM THE FEDERATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF BOLIVIA (CIDOB) HANG A “CLOSED” SIGN AT CAMP CASARE. OCTOBER 17, 2018.

PEDRO VARE, GIMENA BORGES, AND SONIA AVE, AT THE PUBLIC MINISTRY, BENI. DEC. 5, 2018.

to Bolivia with honest and genuine intentions. The level of guts and gumption required to accomplish what he did, where he did it, is almost unfathomable. But there were times he gave reason to question his candor, or at least his judgment, especially when discussing the fire. When I first asked about the incident, and suggested that maybe it was indigenous people angry about money, Taendler scoffed. “They would never burn it down. They *guarded* it,” he said. “Think about it: The indigenous would *keep* that stuff. They’d *use* it. The people that did this burned everything.”



GRAN CONSEJO TSIMANE'

TSIMANE COMMUNITY JUSTICE STAMPS. MAY 22, 2022.

AF employee Fernando Ortiz didn’t leave Casare Camp on the 20th, as he was ordered. He was at the camp the day of the fire and he gave a public statement on June 3 to the San Borja prosecutor’s office indicating that indigenous people *had* taken stuff. Ortiz described “an illegal procession of indigenous people who arrived at our camp, forced us to withdraw under threats of burning everything, and later proceeded to appropriate the movable property, tools, and utensils from camp. I have unofficially learned that those goods were removed, taken to their communities, and distributed among them.”

To the question of community justice, Taendler became almost incredulous. “The burning out that they did has no legal papers—stamped, and dated, and signed,” he said. “There’s nothing. It was like a *hit*. Literally, it was like a hit. There’s no trace. There’s no papers to show that activity. Try to find some.”

THE PEOPLE WHO BURNED Angling Frontiers’ lodge included nine members of the Great Tsimane Council, who had called an emergency meeting at 11 a.m. on Sunday, May 22, 2022, with a Commission of the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia. The topic: *“Determine and take action according to community justice of the Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia, around the illegal acts, abuses, mistreatment, and threats that the Tsimane people have been suffering from Messrs. Patrick F. Taendler and Federico Maracenbaun, owners of the angling services and tourism company Angling Frontiers.”*

The action they chose: “A definitive eviction and dismantling of the Angling Frontiers infrastructure.” A public document from the meeting reads: *“In the face of the lack of seriousness and interest on the part of state institutions responsible for monitoring, controlling, regulating and punishing these situations, under the power conferred by the constitution policy of the plurinational state, we determine to exercise actions of the indigenous peoples of Bolivia, and make our ancestral rights prevail.”*

The document (left) was “stamped, and dated, and signed” by fifteen indigenous leaders—nine from the *Gran Consejo Tsimane*, including its president—and two each from the Naranjalito, Pachene, and Cuchisama communities.

According to Great Tsimane Council President Maguin Gutierrez, Casare Camp was burned, at least in part, due to Angling Frontiers not paying the Council its fees for the past four years. Taendler doesn’t deny that he hasn’t been paying the Council, but says he’s been paying villagers from the three communities directly since 2018, after “they revolted against the Tsimane congress receiving the money first, and demanded that they get it first.”

The fact that community justice took place where Angling Frontiers built its lodge doesn’t mean a competing outfitter played no part in burning it down. But it does seem fair, at a minimum, to question the bold assertion—privately held and publicly shared by Angling Frontiers—that their lodge was enviously burned down by “an unethical competitor.”

INRA WEBSITE (TOP); INSET: GRAN CONSEJO TSIMANE

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WHY TRAVELING IS WORTH THE RISK.

JUSTIN MILLER

Mission Impossible

Tip-Toeing Through Russia BY JUSTIN MILLER

Despite the odds, with the country being in the throes of conflict, I made it to Russia for steelhead season this fall. Even better, I made it back, although my mother and sister had their doubts. It wasn't easy, to say the least. But I wanted to be there, and I felt it was *important* that I be there. Obviously, I do not in any way support the invasion of Ukraine. But I also don't blame my friends in Russia for their government's decisions.

I'm the only American who made the journey this year. I'm also the only one who tried, which wasn't a surprise. This season, only Russian anglers visited the Kamchatka Steelhead Project—an initiative started twenty-eight years ago to protect Asia's only population of these special fish. They kept the program alive and helped us maintain an anti-poaching force on the rivers.

I was skeptical myself about the chances of pulling this off in September. I wasn't breaking any laws; no airlines have offered direct flights from the United States to Russia since March, but it is legal to make a connection from another country, and plenty of non-North American airlines will sell you a ticket. I made my connection on Aeroflot through Instanbul, Turkey (the best route for Amerikanskis), but I still needed tickets to fly *within* Russia once I get there, which I couldn't buy myself.

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Aeroflot—Russia's largest airline by far—flew to more than fifty countries. But since March 8, 2022, it flies only in Russia and Belarus, and a ticket could only be purchased on the Aeroflot website with a credit card issued inside the Russian Federation. None of the U.S. booking agents I work with could even see Aeroflot flights in their systems. So my Russian friend—the outfitter running our steelhead camps—had to buy my plane tickets for me and I had to bring a pile of cash with me to pay him back.

Another problem was that my old Russian visa expired on Aug. 31st, and I assumed that getting a new one was going to be an insurmountable obstacle. But this turned out to be one of the easiest pieces of the puzzle. The Russian consulate issued me a new three-year, multiple-entry visa in less than a week. (I guess it's easier when there's no one else waiting in line.) Even while going through customs in Moscow, officials didn't bat an eye. Nobody treated me strangely at all. Ultimately, the act of *entering* Russia wasn't as difficult as I thought. The trouble came after I got there.

Once inside, sanctions made it nearly impossible to do anything or go anywhere. U.S. credit and ATM cards don't work in Russia. In fact, I was told that my accounts would be frozen if I even attempted to use them. As any American who's traveled to Cuba can tell you, not being able to use a credit card can be a serious issue: When you are out of cash, you are out of money, period.

And, of course, my luggage didn't make it over with me, lost in Istanbul for the entire month. So I ran out of cash quickly, paying first for my flights, then for a pair of waders, a set of

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MILLER, LEFT, WITH ONE OF HIS RUSSIAN GUIDES.

long johns, and a couple pairs of Underroos. I had to beg or borrow for everything else. I arrived in Petropavlovsk (on the Kamchatka Peninsula) on Sept. 23—two days after Putin had announced the mobilization of three hundred thousand Russian civilians to the front lines of the war. The process of rounding them all up was in full swing when I arrived, and I saw many military personnel carriers hauling kids down to the registration offices to get them checked in for war duty.

The U.S. State Department responded the next day, raising its Travel Advisory for American citizens in Russia to Level Four (there is no Level Five). "Do not travel to Russia," the statement read. "U.S. citizens residing or travelling in Russia should depart Russia immediately." By this time, my crew and I were already loading a chopper for the forest. Our philosophy: "Come and get us." Nobody on the trip believed in the war. Nobody supported it, and nobody was going to go terrorize their neighbors for bullshit their government said they did or didn't do.

But it was still scary stuff. A few of our guys got called up. Their girlfriends were calling and telling them that soldiers had come to their homes looking for them. They weren't about to go home and get drafted. One of my friends in town, who wasn't in camp with us in the fall, was so worried that he fled Russia and got an apartment in Turkey. He is still there. Another guy who was with me in camp said there were no young men left in his village at all—every one of them had either fled or were conscripted. One women said every night out in town was "like a bachelorette party these days, only far less joyful." Multiple friends had been arrested for participating in anti-war protests.

Needless to say, it was dodgy as hell over there, with everybody kind of tip-toeing around, trying to fly under the radar, trying not to get sent to prison, or the war. Then there was me, trying not to get arrested or deported. It is heartbreaking to see so many Russian's lives being upended by something they want no part of. Not to mention what Ukraine is going through—being attacked for no reason at all. But I am glad I was there with my crew, making sure they know that I will never turn my back on them, and that they will never be my enemy. Those guys are my brothers.

Incidentally, we did catch a few really nice steelhead. But the fishing felt so small in comparison to what was happening in Ukraine and throughout the rest of Russia. Nevertheless, standing in a river swinging flies for dimers has a way of calming the mind and sending positive energy into the universe. And the universe needs more positive energy right now.

A lot must change before we'll be operating the steelhead program in Russia for Americans and other foreign anglers. No one in their right mind would try to do what I did this fall to get there and back. This is extremely difficult for me to accept, but that's the reality.

I am confident that we will return to some semblance of normalcy in the coming years. It will take some time, but the moment the coast is clear, I hope Steelhead Nation joins me and my friends again, protecting the last stronghold of wild steelhead on Earth.

JUSTIN MILLER

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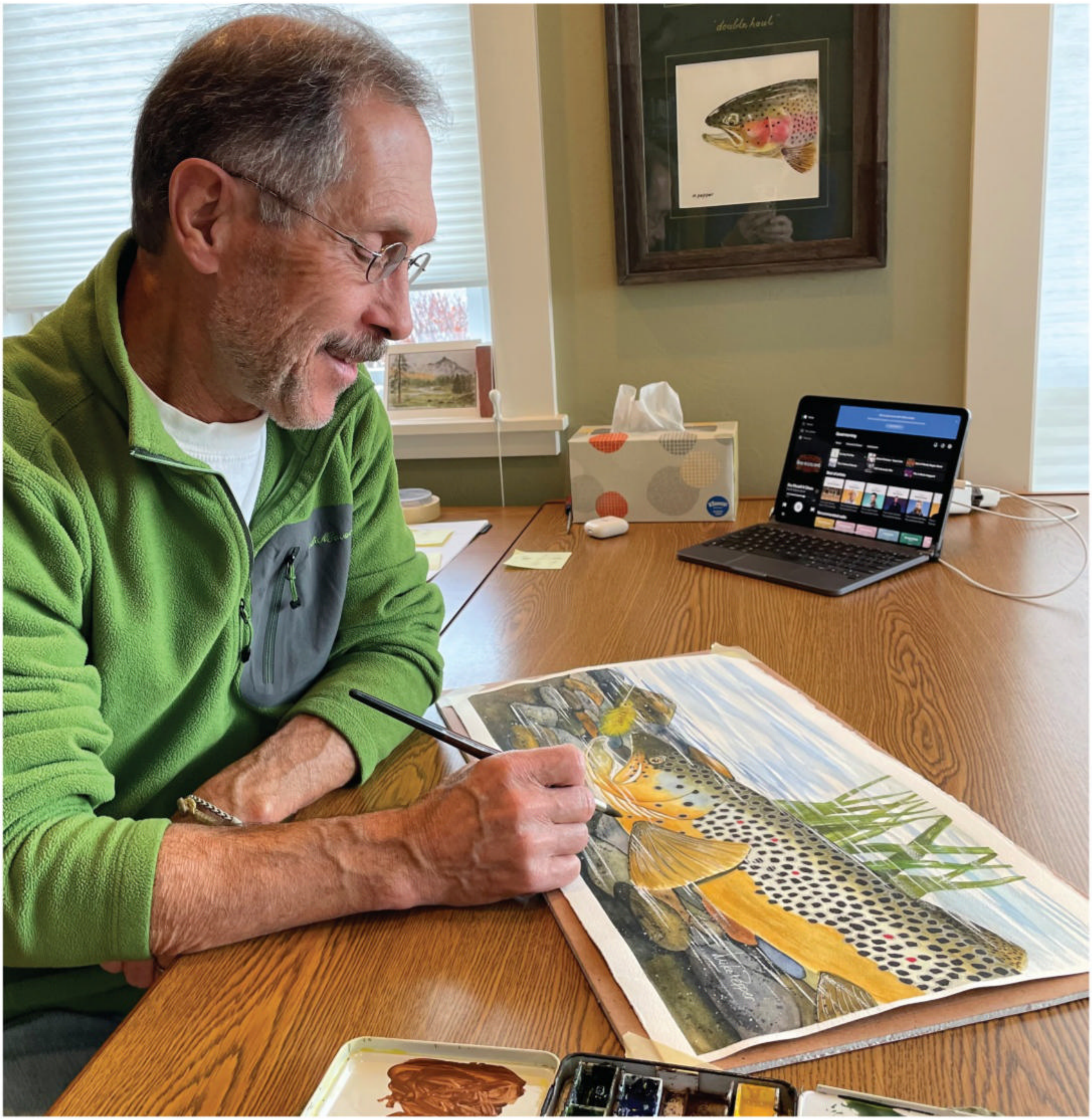


CONNIE PEPPER

Emerging Work

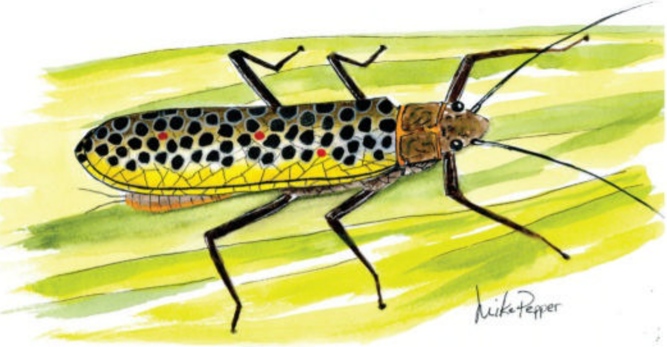
The Watercolors of Mike Pepper BY TOM BIE

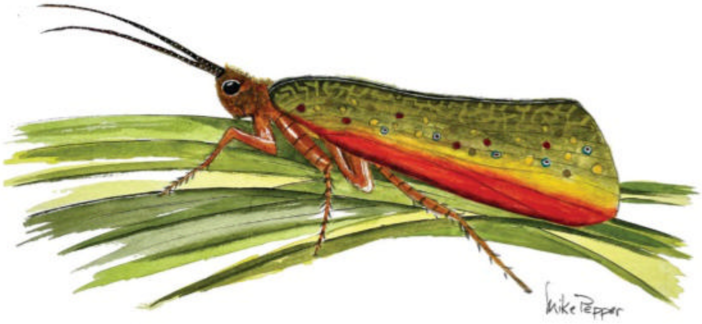
Mike Pepper came late to the painting game. The angler-turned-artist, who's bug-inspired watercolors present a different take on flyfishing art, only started painting after he retired. His wife, Connie, had been painting for twenty years, and after she showed him the basics, he's mainly been self-taught. "But it is surely still a work in progress," Pepper says.

"I'm an average flyfisher with an above-average appreciation for the entire experience," he says. "Painting fish and bugs and the places they live is just one way for me to honor that experience."

Pepper moved to southern Idaho from Washington in 1977 and quickly discovered Silver Creek and the Big Wood River. Both offered opportunities to learn the nuances of flyfishing in world-class fisheries, but, like many Idaho anglers, time on "the Creek" and "the Wood" soon expanded into days on the Henry's Fork, Big Lost, Madison, Missouri, South Fork, and, eventually, to extended excursions in Alaska, BC, and the salt. "I consider myself beyond fortunate," says Pepper, "to have fished so many amazing fisheries for so long."

While he mostly paints for fun, Pepper also does it to learn, and to meet like-minded anglers. "It's amazing how fast fishing stories come out after giving away one of my fish stickers at a boat ramp or a local bar," he says.





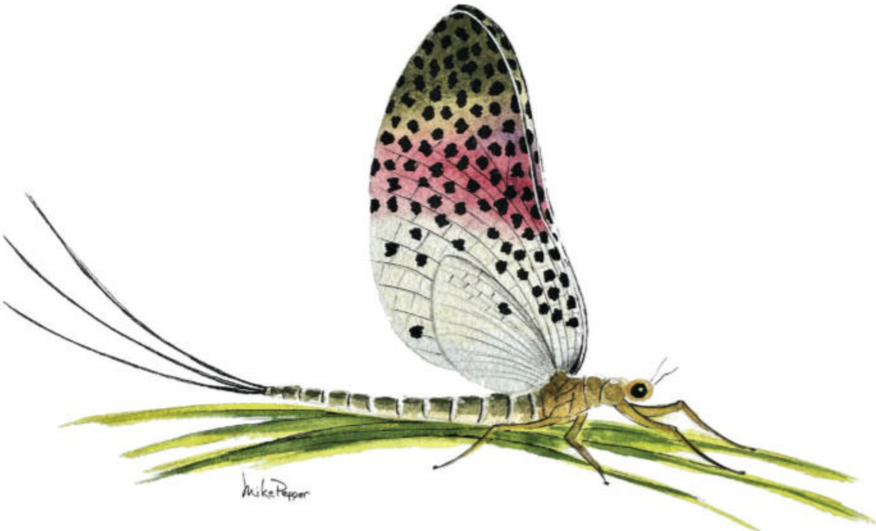
Of course, Pepper also sells his work, as originals, prints, stickers, and even special commissions, which he particularly enjoys. He currently has pieces available in the Full Moon Gallery in Twin Falls, and at the Saddletree Gallery and Lost River Outfitters, both in Ketchum. This past fall, he also began expanding his sales of prints and stickers in several fly shops around Idaho and Montana. He doesn't yet have a website, but—like any contemporary artist, he has the obligatory Instagram page (@colorsonthefly), where he connects with other anglers, artists, and potential customers. One thing notable about Pepper is his recent work with fish-themed bugs.

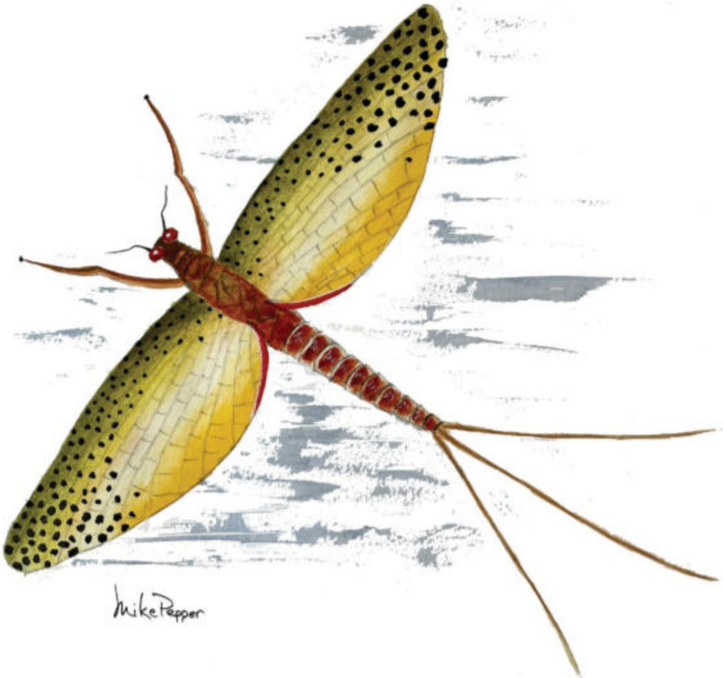
"It's always been clear to me that the fish and bugs are directly linked," Pepper says. "How does a Silver Creek flyfisher not connect its huge brown drakes with its huge brown trout? Or the green drake hatch on the Henry's Fork with its finicky rainbows? Many of my paintings have included fish, flies, and the place, but as separate elements."

Pepper points out that it's nothing new for artists to celebrate their love of fish flanks by painting their patterns on everything from t-shirts to trucks to Trail 70s, and more recently into the shape of other animals, state maps, etc. "I was just having one of those restless nights, searching for a new approach," Pepper says, "and it occurred to me that I hadn't seen anyone directly connect fish and bugs by merging them into the same image."

The following morning, "Brown Drake" and "Rainbow Drake" were born. After that, it was a short leap to connect brown trout to stoneflies in "Brownstone," caddisflies to brook trout in "Caddis Brookie," and rusty spinners to cutthroat in "Rusty Cutthroat Spinner."

The resulting images elicit memories of specific fishing experiences on favorite waters during their classic hatches. Other iterations in the series are already in progress, and plans for prints and stickers are in the works.



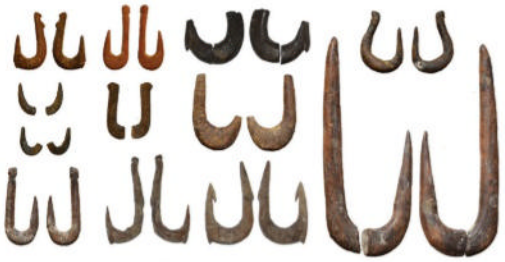


JEFF CURRIER WITH AN IDAHO CYPRINID.

Ancient Carping

Flyfishing took place 13,000 years ago BY EBEN PINDYCK

Flyfishing for carp holds about as much appeal for me as getting a face tattoo. But what if my ancestors—or yours—were doing just that at the dawn of civilization? University of Connecticut anthropology professor Natalie Munro hypothesizes that this may indeed have been the case among the prehistoric people who regularly visited an ancient lake in what is today northern Israel.



SO MUCH FOR BACK-BARBED AND DOUBLE-BARBED HOOKS BEING "INNOVATIVE." SOMEONE USED THESE HOOKS TO CATCH CARP FROM AN ANCIENT LAKE, ABOUT 13,000 YEARS BEFORE THE REST OF US.

In 2014, an international team of scientists, including Munro, started excavating an archaeological site along the Jordan River, and began finding remarkably well-preserved items used by ancient anglers: hooks from animal bone, stone sinkers, even strands of animal hair used in making line. The site, called Jordan River Dureijat (JRD), eventually revealed "the largest collection of fishing technology from the Epipaleolithic and Paleolithic periods," according to the team's groundbreaking 2021 study, published in the Oct. '21 science journal *PLOS ONE*.

They found nineteen fish hooks used between 12,000 and 14,000 years ago—about the time humans transitioned from roving bands of hunter-gatherers to settled farming communities. Munro focuses on this period in her work. "I'm interested in the beginning of agriculture," she told me.

It's rare to find such artifacts, but the hooks, as well as six grooved stones (for sinkers), were preserved in layers of mud. "They were likely lost while fishing," says Munro.

Before this, humans used traps, nets, and harpoons to catch fish. The incorporation of hook-and-line represents a major technological—and evolutionary—step. "The study of the fish hooks provides the first evidence that several landmark innovations in fishing technology were already in use at this early date," reads the study. "These include barbs, a variety of line-attachment techniques including knobs, grooves, and adhesives, and some of the earliest evidence of artificial lures."

The researchers found a bounty of clam shells they believe prehistoric anglers might have used to make lures: "Artificial baits may have included shell flutters—flat pieces of shiny mother-of-pearl that wiggle in the water to attract fish," the study notes. "Today, the use of light lures requires a casting technique known as fly fishing. Given the small dimensions of the hooks likely to have been equipped with artificial lures at JRD, the possibility that a similar angling method was already in use during the Natufian should not be ruled out."

No ancient rods were found, but Munro believes the rods used could have been similar to tenkara rods, which originated in Japan. "I imagine they were using something like that," she says.

A zooarchaeologist, Munro studies animal remains. Besides finding hooks made of bone, the team also uncovered remains from birds, snakes, deer, and hares (among other prey) as well as teeth and vertebrae from fish. And one type of fish dominates the findings. "Cyprinids [carp] are by far the most common family in all layers," the authors write in the study.

So, it's quite possible that—thousands of years ago, before civilization even existed—humans may have been flyfishing for carp. (And Barry Reynolds thought *he* was ahead of his time!) But fear not, fellow non-carping purists: "They do believe one of the fish remains is a trout," Munro says.

TOM BIE (CURRIER); NATALIE MUNRO (HOOKS)

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Be Your Maker

Build your own bamboo rod, with help BY WILL RICE

WHILE HAVING A BEER on the deck of the Riff Raff Brewing Company in Pagosa Springs, Colo., I spied a fly shop I'd never heard of before. Since I simply must check out every new fly shop, I stopped in—and learned that it's not a fly shop.

The first thing that hit me was the smell of wood, and what appeared to be a full-blown carpentry shop in the back, that smelled of bamboo. After a quick walk around, I introduced myself to the owners of PJ's Fine Bamboo Rods—Paul J. Dufour and his wife, Rosanna.

"We became a full-time business in late 2019, when I began giving one-on-one instruction, with the hope of hosting multi-student classes," PJ said. "Unfortunately, that dream was put on hold with Covid, but we were finally able to open our workshop in August of 2022." Their first sold-out class took place just weeks later.

Dufour has been building rods, tying flies, and constructing nearly everything flyfishing-related for most of his adult life. "My formal training in split cane bamboo rods was in 2015," he said. "Being in the trades, I've always had more skill than money, so whenever I was able to build something rather than buy it, I would always give it a shot."

Dufour said learning in the age of YouTube helped develop his techniques and tapers. "Of course," he adds, "having decades of experience wrapping fiberglass rods and tying flies was also useful when I began wrapping bamboo with traditional silk."

Clients who sign up for this hands-on, intensive class are provided all of the necessary tools, materials, and equipment. The course includes six days of master rodsmith instruction; and at the end of the class, students will have built their own two-piece, one-tip bamboo fly rod—three-weight to six-weight in the length of their choice.

Building a bamboo rod is certainly a unique skill, but teaching others how to ply the craft themselves seems like yeoman's work. But Dufour doesn't feel that way. "As an angler, I don't know if anything has ever brought me more pride than catching a trout on a bamboo rod that I built from a raw material, with a fly that I tied myself," he said. "And that's an experience I love passing along to other anglers and craftsmen. I'm a huge believer in self-sufficiency, and being able to teach someone how to build a functioning tool on a fundamental level is extremely gratifying for me."

Pagosa Springs isn't an easy town to reach, but in Colorado this can be a good thing, as it increases the odds of uncrowded water. The town sits roughly 275 miles from Denver and the closest semi-major airport is Durango, sixty miles west. The trade-off for the trek is that Pagosa Springs is a fairly fishy community, with two miles of the San Juan running right through town. So you won't have to go far to test-drive your new rod.

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ROSANNA DUFOUR (2)

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Adam Pate fishing for fall rainbow trout on the Flathead River in Northwest Montana // Noah Couser

FISHING CHALEUR BAY FLATS FOR STRIPERS IS AN EMERGING FISHERY.

MAÉLIE MARTIN

Stripers, Eh?

Flats fishing the 48th parallel BY BEN CARMICHAEL

"We have tails at one o'clock," Andrew tells me. I'm standing on the bow of a seventeen-foot skiff as our guide, Andrew Murphy, points at a large school feeding in front of us. The scene is textbook bonefish: the boat, the clear shallows, and the tanned, mellow guide. Except we're in Québec, two thousand miles north of Nassau and the nearest conch fritter.

This is the *Baie de Chaleur* (Chaleur Bay), a southern arm of the Gulf of St. Lawrence into which more than twenty famous Atlantic-salmon rivers flow, including the Restigouche, Bonaventure, and Grand Cascapedia. The bay sits on the easternmost part of Québec's Gaspé Peninsula—a knotty thumb of land at the geological north end of the Appalachian Mountains. Here, you trade Bahamian Kalik beer for French-Canadian poutine, an artery-clogging combination of french fries and cheese curds topped with gravy. You also swap equatorial sunshine for mountains falling steeply into the ocean, and the well-known Bahamian flats for a striped-bass fishery still largely undiscovered in its modern state.

After years of overfishing, commercial and recreational angling for stripers was closed in Chaleur Bay in 2000, when spawning-population estimates dipped to less than five thousand. Nearly two decades later, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada estimated that the same population had rebounded to more than a million fish in 2018. During the lengthy closure, stripers—known locally as "*le bar rayé*"—had enough time to recover, and anglers had enough time to forget they were there. The slate was wiped clean for a new generation, and it's fair to say that the current generation of the fishery is only a decade old.

Murphy is the first guide here to use a flats skiff, and one of the few who guides for stripers. Those that do "are figuring out the fishery, figuring out their coastline," he says. "There are scattered efforts, scattered dudes here and there. I'll be driving along the road at 11 a.m. and there'll be fish blitzing for more than a mile, and you're never going to see anyone in a boat on them and rarely see anyone on the shore fishing for them."

Murphy estimates the number of anglers currently targeting stripers along this two-hundred-mile-long coastline to be "maybe fifty." Meanwhile, back on my home waters, you can count more anglers than that on one stretch of the Cape Cod Canal in a single morning.

Local techniques have been evolving but could still be considered something of a throwback (fly shops carry Clousers almost exclusively; Popovics and hollow flies are still largely patterns waiting to be discovered). As Murphy put it, "People here are not very well versed in how to catch them."

I've experienced this firsthand as I've stood on the shore and, through broken English and French, tried to teach locals some knots, or show them new patterns to use, as stripers surfaced all around us.

I asked a Canadian friend, Ted McGregor, who owns a local fishing camp and fishes for stripers regularly, about the

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QUÉBEC'S CHALEUR BAY, HOME TO BEEFY STRIPERS.

pressure. “There are no boats, period,” he said. “There is really no pressure on that fishery.”

Running around on his skiff, Murphy found us plenty of pods of stripers. And when we weren't seeing schools, we set up on a point with an outflowing tide and caught them blind-casting. My friend Steve Gobin, an accomplished Pacific Northwest steelheader who'd never striper fished before, caught twenty stripers on twenty casts. We often doubled-up. Some of these were smaller fish, but with a strong catch-and-release ethic on the peninsula, fish over forty inches are fairly common.

PLAYER.

This was my first experience venturing onto the bay. When glancing back at the mountains containing Atlantic salmon rivers I've fished for more than thirty years, it felt as if I'd entered an unknown dimension of a place I thought I knew deeply. I was disoriented in familiar surroundings, as though in a marine M.C. Escher sketch. The sense of discovery was real, and the sense of potential—in an area where the salmon narrative is one of decline—was refreshing.

It's hard to say, though, just how much potential is really there. “People still don't understand the potential in its entirety,” says McGregor, “because it's just not popular enough yet.” Late last fall, Murphy went out daily to see how late the stripers stuck around the bay. No one really knew.

This will no doubt change. Kyle Schaefer and Alec Griswold, who last spring opened Soul Fly Lodge in the Bahamas' Berry Islands, have spent a suspicious amount of time in recent years chasing Gaspé stripers for two guys whose business is three thousand kilometers south. “Exploring new flats in the Canadian north proved well worth the effort,” Schaefer says. “The number of fish in skinny water, with mountains as a backdrop, and shallow salt flats off Canada's east coast… It is a truly unique experience.”

To Murphy and McGregor, the striper recovery is a success story. But many are worried about how striper numbers will impact Atlantic salmon populations. “The overlap with salmon is certainly going to be a question,” Murphy says. “But I don't think having a healthy striper fishery and a healthy salmon fishery are necessarily mutually exclusive, you know?”

Historically, where the two species have overlapped, a strong population of one didn't necessarily doom the other. But while salmon everywhere are currently under immense global pressure, stripers on the Gaspé face almost none.

With so many around, they're not hard to catch, and they can serve as a useful compliment to the elusive Atlantic. I can vouch for this: If you tire of chasing another “fish of a thousand casts,” I have often caught stripers here on the *first* cast. Moreover, there is the possibility for what I have called the “Get It While You Still Can Gaspé Grand Slam”—a day in which you catch an Atlantic salmon, a big sea-run brook trout, and a striper, each potentially of world-class size. To my knowledge, there is nowhere else in the world that's possible, at least for the time being.

As we motored back across the bay with the sea rising and the rain falling, we passed schools of tailing stripers and a salmon that leapt across white caps. After a week of slow fishing for Atlantics, my friend, Steve the steelheader, was elated by the day. I was too, but I also wondered if that salmon was leaping toward a familiar home or away from something unknown and threatening. Time will tell if both salmon and stripers can peacefully coexist in Chaleur Bay. For now, I am clinging to the feeling of discovery, and the rare opportunity to love a fishery from the very beginning. I just hope I don't live to see it through to the very end as well.

BEN CARMICHAEL (TOP); ANDREW MURPHY (INSET)

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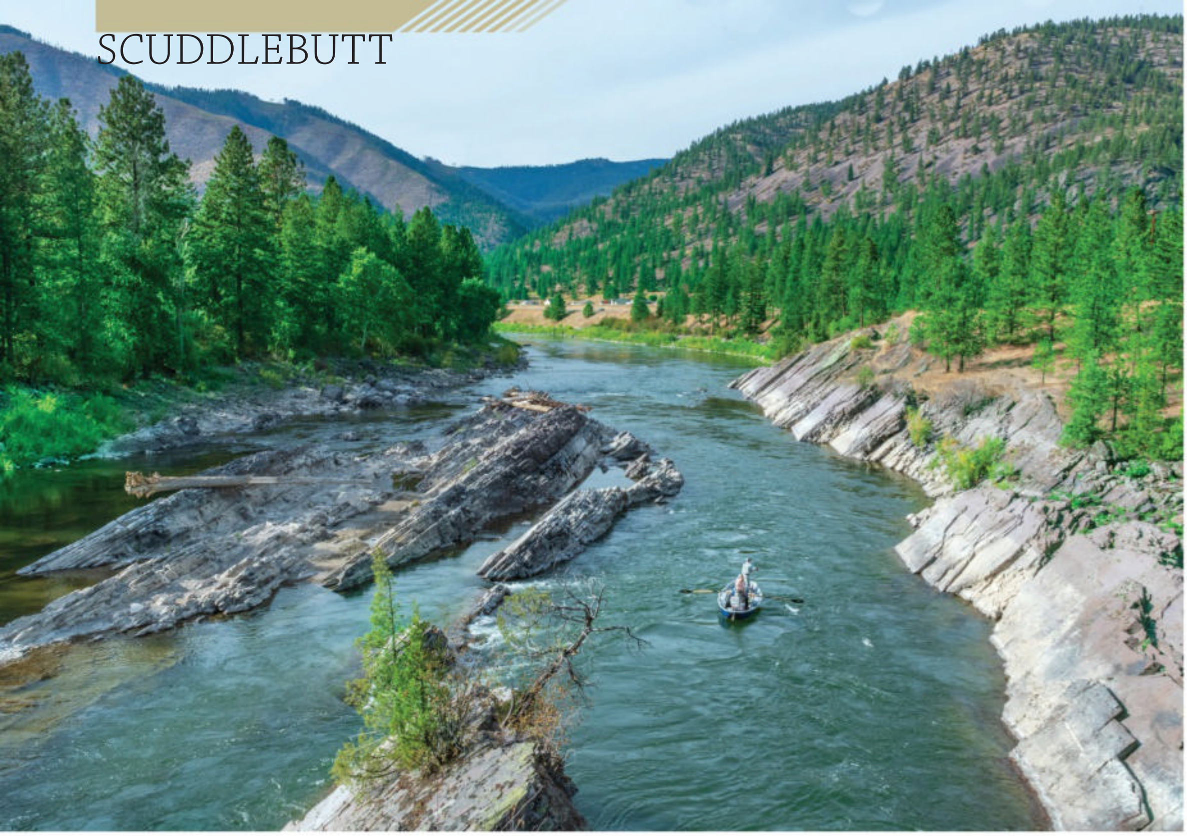

FISHING FOR CUTTIES IN ALBERTON GORGE ON MONTANA'S CLARK FORK.

B. ANSEL

Funding Windfall

TU and USFS team up for rivers BY ROBERT O'HARROW

FOR DECADES, the United States Forest Service (USFS) and Trout Unlimited (TU) have worked together to protect coldwater fisheries. The Feds contributed technical expertise and millions in funding. TU used the money and legions of local staff and volunteers to restore thousands of miles of streams and protect hundreds of thousands of acres of national forest and grasslands.

Now the partnership is going big. In an effort to accelerate the pace of freshwater restoration, the Forest Service will be giving TU up to $40 million over the next five years, funding an array of watershed projects in many of the 154 national forests, where forty percent of the country's best trout steams are located.

"Our agreement with Trout Unlimited continues our joint success as stewards of national forests and grasslands," said Forest Service Chief Randy Moore. "Our partnership is not just about cleaning a stream or increasing fish population. It's life-sustaining work that is as vital to aquatic species as it is to people and communities."

The spending underscores a remarkable political turnabout in the nation's capitol, where the climate crisis is now, finally, considered a priority. And it comes as the byproducts of climate change—wildfire, drought, flash flooding—are ravaging coldwater streams across North America.

The official name of the project is the National Watershed and Aquatic Restoration Initiative. The money comes from Bipartisan Infrastructure Law—the giant spending bill aimed at creating new jobs and addressing longstanding problems with roads, bridges, railways, drinking water, and environmental issues.

Trout Unlimited has played an ever-larger role in freshwater conservation as Forest Service budgets have flattened. In recent years, the agency has had a hard time even hiring enough firefighters to contend with the surge in wildfires, which often devastate coldwater streams by wiping out shade along their banks and filling spawning beds with silt and ash.

TU President Chris Wood, a former Forest Service official, was upbeat despite the challenges. "These are incredibly resilient systems," Wood said. "And the work that we're doing with the Forest Service and other partners is helping recover and strengthen that natural resiliency."

Working under a Master Participating Agreement, TU works with Forest Service officials to identify targets and articulate solutions, tapping into its roughly 300 employees and 350,000 volunteers in 400 chapters across the country.

Wood says TU's approach—a mix of advocacy, diplomacy, policy savvy, and boots-on-the-ground hard work—sometimes gives the group a deeper reach into local communities and the corporate world than the government might have.

Some of the major projects slated for the coming years include continued efforts to clean up abandoned mines; the construction of fish passages on the Upper Delaware watershed in New York; new habitat structures to support beavers and bull trout in the Upper Klamath Basin in Oregon; the reopening of sixty-four miles of native bull trout and western cutthroat trout in high-elevation tributaries of Montana's Clark Fork; and restoration of the Potomac River headwaters in West Virginia, Virginia, and Maryland.

Wood acknowledged that the $40 million represents a fraction of the money needed to fully restore and protect the nation's watersheds. But he said TU aggressively leverages the money it receives from the government, using it in part to boost donations from other nonprofits and conservation-minded corporations.

In 2019, the group restored more than 500 miles of streams, many of them serving as headwater habitat for native trout, according to a TU report about its partnership with the Forest Service. According to the report, it completed that work with help from almost $20 million in Forest Service funding over the previous five years, supplemented by more than $43 million from private donors.

"There's a ton we can do if we have the resources," Wood said. "If we can sustain this kind of funding, we can actually help recover many rivers and streams. This kind of work gives people hope."

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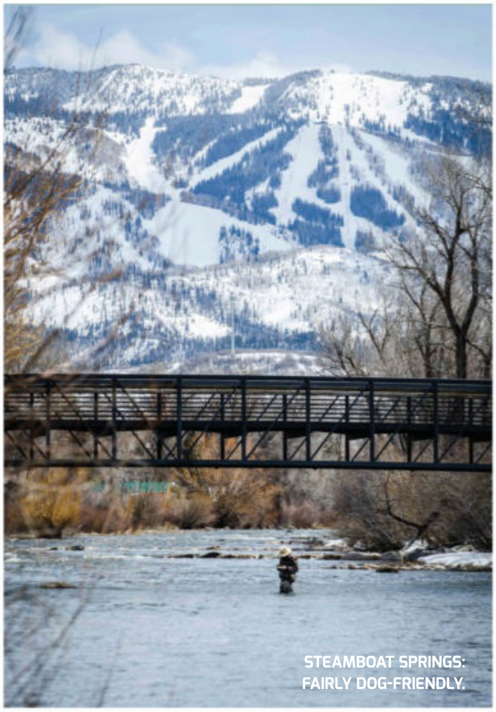
ASK TRASK

Q: **Dear Trask,**
My humans are super into their skiing, almost as much as their flyfishing, and while I dig the whole playing-in-the-snow part at the base area, we often end up at some fancy resort where I get stuck in the truck while they "train" or "shred the gnar" or whatever. Can you recommend a good resort for dogs, where there's other stuff to do (like, uh, fish) that could maybe help limit my lame, boring truck time?

—Daisy, Bozeman, MT


STEAMBOAT SPRINGS: FAIRLY DOG-FRIENDLY.

KYLE PERKINS

A: **Dear Daisy,**
First, remember the golden rule of resorts: No matter where your peeps bring you, if it's a powder day, your sleuth move after they finally find a parking spot is to jump out and run away. At least until you can get all bouncy through some pow, cuz that rulz! For limiting your jail time, steer them toward resorts with a river visible from the slopes. Being anglers, they're more likely to be out of shape. Thus, seeing good water from the hill increases the odds of a half-ski/half-fish day. The best spot is Sun Valley cuz they walk *over* the Big Wood River to *get to* the skiing. If trout are rising, those skis may just go right back in the truck, and then: Voilà!—A fishing day with the dog.

VER BAIT 'EM

"The toxicity of social media makes it easy to forget how truly magical this innovation felt when it was new. From 2004 to 2009, you could join Facebook and everyone you'd ever known—including people you'd definitely lost track of—was right there, ready to connect or reconnect. The posts and photos I saw characterized my friends' changing lives, not the conspiracy theories that their unhinged friends had shared with them."

—IAN BOGOST, "THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IS ENDING," *THE ATLANTIC*, NOV. '22

"We have lots of work to do throughout the Southwest on conservation and shrinking demand. The low-hanging fruit is not so low right now; we are just going to have to cut our appetite."

—BRAD WIND, GM OF NORTHERN WATER (A PUBLIC AGENCY), WHO WORKED WITH RIVER-ADVOCACY GROUPS TO RE-ROUTE A STRETCH OF THE COLORADO AROUND HIS DISTRICT'S DAM, CREATING A NEW, FREE-FLOWING RIVER SECTION.

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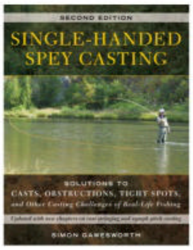
GREYS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SIMON GAWESWORTH

Gawesworth's New Book

To some, single-handed spey casting may seem illogical. But if you've spent much time with a two-hander, you know that clarity often comes from instinct, not intent. Standing at the bow of a skiff or driftboat, an experienced speycaster will, without thinking, make a sudden Snap T, placing the line where it's wanted in a fraction of the time required to strip in and start double-hauling. That is the real value of this book: making a few specific casts be *instinctual*—casts that, before reading it, you never even knew existed. Others may have Simon's casting knowledge, but skillfully passing it along is something else. Simon excels at this. Whether beginner or seasoned vet, you will refer to this book more frequently than you expected.—*TB*

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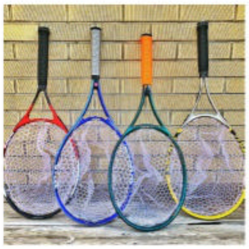

Repurposed Racquets

At a 2017 river cleanup event that also highlighted upcycling (reusing discarded objects), Denver-based angler Patrick Mapes found a discarded tennis racquet. "That's when it all started," Mapes says. "I found an old racquet on a riverbank during a cleanup." Eventually, Mapes' company, Urban Anglers USA, figured out how to turn old tennis racquets—otherwise headed to a garbage heap—into landing nets. Urban Anglers USA is all about fishing adventures in a city environment, encouraging people to notice overlooked water in their own backyards. Through fishing trips, cleanups, and other social gatherings, the company has grown right alongside sales of its upcycled nets. "The Racket Net is our most popular product," says Mapes. "We've recycled more than 700 racquets in 42 states."—*Will Rice*

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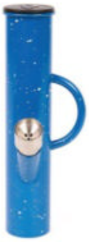

The DangleBong

What first caught my eye was the company's tagline: "Products for people who don't *not* smoke weed." With recreational cannabis now legal and widely available in twenty-one states, those who partake have an endless variety of forms—from a jillion flavors of gummies or vape pens to stoney cookies or even THC-infused-beer. Glass pipes are always available, but there are still those days when old-school stoners long for an occasional Spicoli-esque, throwback bong hit. Problem is, bongs are typically either glass or plastic and don't fit comfortably in sling-packs. Enter the DangleBong: seven inches of love made from medical-grade titanium. What better heirloom than an unbreakable bong to pass down to your favorite, least-promising grandchild?—*TB*

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Bob the Garbage Man

Bob the Garbage Man is a Jersey god. He's a chunkah's chunkah who understands that social media's primary gift to society is providing a platform to make fun of others, especially those that take themselves too seriously. He hates yo-zuris and schoolies but he loves lead, cows, McRibs, chunkin' sticks, Atlantic City, the Oriental Spa, and smokin' four packs of heaters over a long-ass power soak. Bob's got a striper belt buckle he won in a fight with a carnie in Virginia. He owns a piece of rebar named Trudy that he uses to put fish to sleep. Bob knows how to find crab-grade bunkah, he has a PhD in satire, and he spends his days just waiting for all youse mooks to get your heads outta yer asses.—*TB*

INSTA: BOBTHEGARBAGEMAN

STEVE WINTER

P-22, L.A. Cougar, R.I.P.

P-22, the most iconic cat in L.A., died on Dec. 17th. Like the endangered Southern California steelhead, he was my hero—wild, legendary, and beautiful. He made me aware of the wildness of our mountains and the treacherous barriers we've created for wildlife movement. He made me want to fight even harder to protect wild animals and their habitats. Following P-22's life, and those of our other iconic species like the elusive steelhead, underscores that we must bring down barriers to coexistence and leave a legacy of connectedness and integrity through watershed stewardship, science, and investment. Thank you, P-22, for your beauty, strength, and perseverance. I will think of you always as the cat that graced L.A. with wildness.—*Wendy Katagi*

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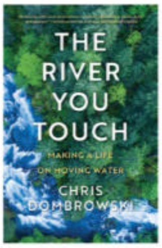

The River You Touch

When recommending books, I'll typically try to *describe* why the writing is worth your time and money. With Dombrowski's latest, I'll just let you decide for yourself: *Despite the nontraditional lifestyle that my occupation [as a flyfishing guide] affords, I have lately fallen prey to the plague of screens and a generic brand of informed cynicism, to an existence that appears rife with concentration but that in truth is fragmented and increasingly short on profound impression. I live among the homogenized throngs chained to the assumption that our moment-to-moment ability to "virtually connect" literally connects us, but as our collective actions exhibit, we have failed to truly comprehend our infinite ties. What are we if not inextricably linked, and yet blind to this blunt fact?"* —*TB*

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GRAND SLAM DESTINATION

JOE KLEMENTOVICH

Late Winter in Jersey

Absolution for the unworthy BY STEVE SPAHN

THERE COMES A TIME in the dregs of winter when I just have to get out. In my undergrad days, after I invented alcohol, a group of us would get up before dawn and go down to the still-frozen lake to drink beer from a keg. Most of us thought we were pretty cool just to be up so early, but Malzone took it up a notch when he rushed the ice. He was amped-up in a loony, intense way, and got about ten yards from the beach leaping from ice chunk to ice chunk before he began to sink. He stopped, turned to us, raised his arms and screamed: “They said only Jesus could walk on water!” Then he fell in.

We fished Malzone out of the lake, held him up next to the fire, and stuck a cigarette in his twitching blue lips. He said he’d never do anything that stupid again because he never wanted to get so sober so fast. After that we called him The Seal, but—with an angular, snout-like face; small, flat ears set back on his head; and a thin grin stretching from one side of his head around to the other—the nickname fit long before then. When Malzone stopped shaking enough to hold his own beer, the cop showed up. He took our keg and we scattered to the cars.

Bravado, these days, is me in neoprene waders standing at the edge of the flat on a late winter afternoon. I am standing where Superstorm Sandy came ashore a decade ago. You’d never know it today unless you look for tatters of flotsam left high in the mulberry trees by the fourteen-foot surge. The marsh appears nearly dead this morning, covered by its tawny winter coat. But the mud is already alive with larva of mosquitoes that’ll be looking for blood come May. Across Little Egg inlet, over Shooting Thorofare, south and east past Brigantine Island, the Atlantic City skyline lays like spinal plates on a sleeping dragon, waiting for the night.

I step into the water for the first time since fall, carrying a nine-foot 10--weight attached to a Clouser. A frontal system is set to blow through. I glance over my shoulder, westward, toward an almost indistinguishable line of forest several miles distant, the Eastern edge of the New Jersey Pine Barrens where they butt up to the marsh. The western sky is hung with a purple curtain of cloud.

There is not much time, just a lull just before the front ushers in blustery northwest winds. I turn back to the sea and wade southeast toward the edge of the flat, a shelf that drops from waist-deep to forty feet in one step. I’ve taken that step, not paying attention. I was able to scratch my way back onto the flat, no harm done thanks to my belt, other than a bruised ego.

I think a black dot on the water is a bird. Cormorants often pop up after one of their underwater hunting excursions. But it seems too early in the year for them. I continue to double-haul. The repetitive motion is like meditation, especially when you know there’s nothing to catch. You do it just for the doing of it, like sex in the golden years, only more contemplative.

I always seem to start seasons in some sort of purist bent. And

I don't know why I consider flyfishing to be any more pure than other ways to sportfish. I guess it's more pure than hanging your belly on the railing of the bridge over Little Sheephead Creek, with a Coors Lite in one hand and your rod propped up in a bucket.

Casting a fly rod in February, on a wind-blown Northeast coast, could be considered more of an exercise in self-flagellation than a sport. It cuts to the bone of my East Coast, Irish Catholic programming: We are all unworthy. "Your mothers went to death's door bringing you into this world!" Sister Jacobe would froth at us. She wondered why our mothers went to the trouble of giving birth to the likes of us. Pubescent obsession on physical features of the opposite sex will invariably lead to the eternal flames of hell unless you find the confessional and tell the priest how you have failed. The bored, half-awake voice from behind the darkened screen conveys penance and absolution. Then: Salvation is mine! But it is a fleeting state.

Let me be precise: In February along the Jersey Shore, there are no small, exquisitely crafted flies being cast with a quiet forearm motion and a genteel flick of the wrist; no unfurling of a gentlemanly loop that quietly drops the presentation forty feet out, everything in perfect harmony. This is gut-bucket, get-behind-the-mule flyfishing. To use a quote from Tom McGuane, the most important characteristics of a steelheader are "a big arm and an IQ approaching room temperature." Steelheaders would fit right in on the Northeast coast.

Malzone's budding career as an Air Force pilot came to an abrupt end when he stole the Cessna 170 used by the Reserve Officer Training Corp for flight training. In that day and age of war, anarchy, political assassinations, Black Power movement, women's lib, anti-war riots, anti-establishment riots, riots in the cities, riots on campus, bra-burning and body counts, plus the never-trust-anyone-over-thirty generation gap, we all wondered why anyone, let alone Malzone, would opt into "The System" by signing up for ROTC. Why Malzone would steal an airplane was obvious: He was fucking nuts. But he didn't really steal the airplane. It was just sitting there, not being used. Malzone simply added a little initiative. He took it, flew it around, landed it at the same airport, and parked it back where he found it. Is that stealing? Questionable judgment, perhaps, but not theft.

I see another dark spot on the surface, up-tide this time, but closer. That is no bird, I realize. That's a head! It's a freaking seal! The water seems instantly colder. I reel in and put up the fly, then stand in the water and watch it work, feeling the cold seep into my legs. The seal doesn't seem to be having fun. I've been envious of other sea creatures like porpoise, albacore or yellowfin, gannets and frigates. But I'm glad not to be a seal.

Thunder rumbles across the marsh, sending any thoughts of spring scurrying into bat caves of memory. A blast of cold air hits my back as I pull my stiff legs from the mud, turn shoreward and lower my head, shielding my face from the stinging drops sweeping in with the storm.

STEVE SPAHN *lives in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey with the lady he met in Saudi Arabia, their cat Charlie, and the occasional granddog.*

POTENTIAL FRIEND, OR FOE, READY FOR BATTLE.

DARCY BACHA

Loyalty and Betrayal

Can my fly rod be trusted? BY RICHARD WILSON

THERE IS AN OPAQUE Irish notion that humans can exchange atoms with inanimate objects. This usually enhances one at the expense of the other, and it happens almost imperceptibly slowly. My fellow Irishman, the novelist Flann O'Brien, wrote about the transfer between policemen and their bicycles back when bicycles were a new technology. The police did not grow wheels—it's much more gradual and subtle than that.

Fly rods offer a good example. A favorite rod is a trusted friend, its cork worn to the hand so that a rod improves over time at delivering what's needed. The right rod grows on us as we grow into it. O'Brien would recognize this.

It's a relationship that works in our favor because we choose a rod for the fisherman we think we are, not the lesser one we see in the mirror. So the rod we buy is nearly always better at casting than its new owner. Not so much better that it's over after the first date, but better enough that, with time, as atoms migrate, the angler improves. There's also magic sprinkled on this pairing; when the right rod finds us, together we grow into more than the sum of our parts.

I have owned two such rods. In my early teens, several decades ago, I was given a hand-me-down split-cane Farlow's Ritz Super Parabolic Fario Club, 8' 5" (there's nothing new in daft names and oddball lengths). It was a lovely rod, albeit one based on '60s hype, namely that the parabolic curve of the cane made it more sophisticated. It didn't.

I fished it until the little finger on my right hand had indents from being wedged into the reel as I sought an extra yard or two. I reversed the tops and fished it until it was a gently curvy S-shape. It lasted me until my thirties, despite a flirtation with a boron interloper and a couple of duds. I still get a warm glow whenever I think about it. And a pang of regret when I remember the double-hauling. I don't think it liked that.

Later, on an impulse, I bought a rod I hadn't tried at a price I couldn't afford. This 8' 6" Sage RPL changed my fishing world. It had power, feel, and precision, and made everything that had gone before it feel mediocre. If muscle-memory is the hard-wired explanation for how we cast, then I was hard-wired to that Sage, just as I'd been to the Ritz.

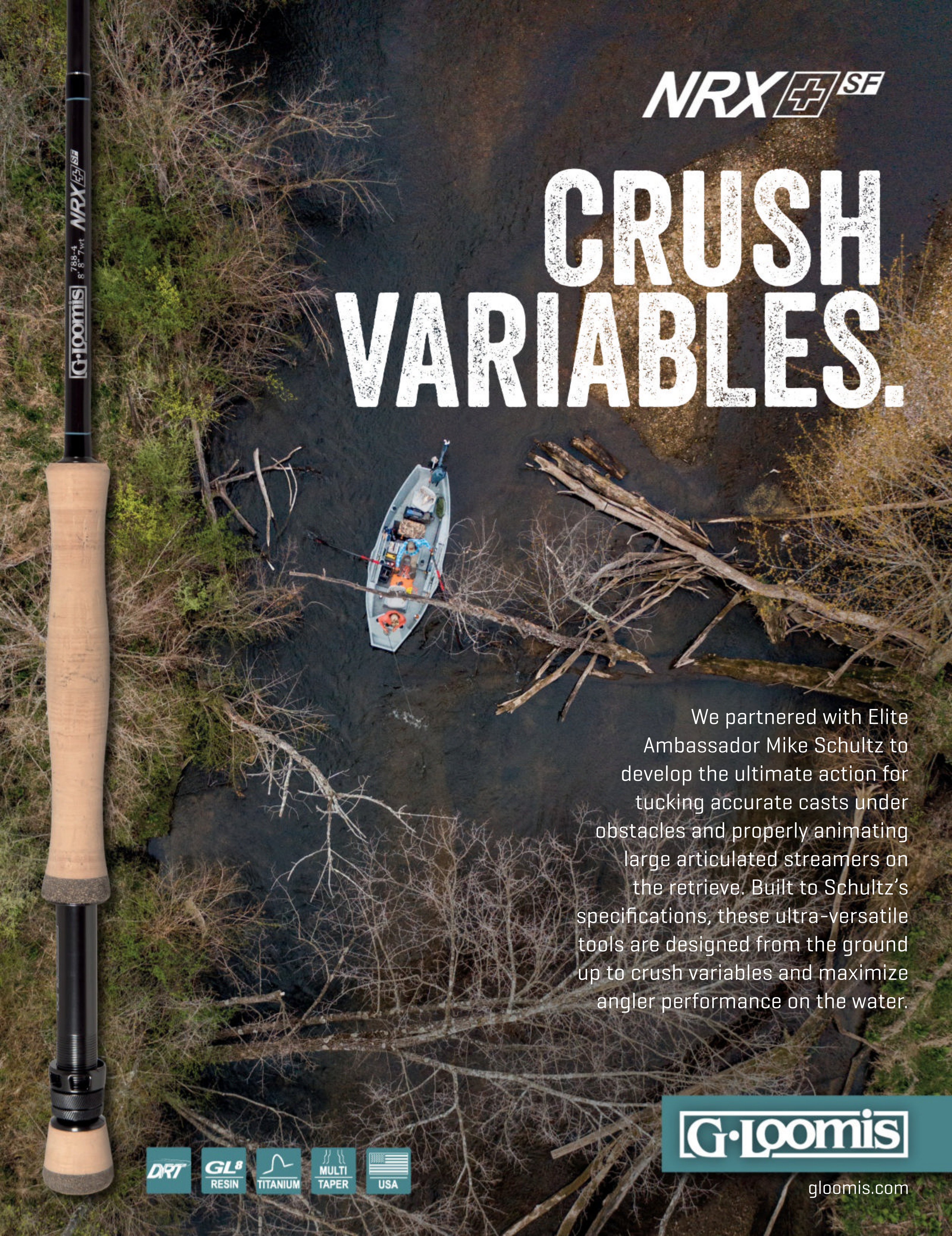
Better rods came to market, but I resisted temptation because resetting a long-term relationship is challenging. Until, lured by the glittery wonders of the Internet and a feeling of tackle inadequacy, I updated my two-piece Sage to the more recent X version. It weighs next-to-nothing, throws a lighter line farther, and fits in a carry-on bag. Clearly, it is a better rod in every respect. Now that the shiny cork is losing its buff, I think I finally have my third keeper.

But since the early 1970s those first two rods stand out, while the rest fade from memory. Both were good by the standards of their day, especially the ground-breaking RPL, which can still hold its own. The Ritz is a creature of the past. I fail to understand the mythologizing of cane rods. Been there, done that, and I'm not going back.

The moral of this tale is that a maturing partnership between angler and a good rod trumps the allure of shiny techno-babble. Most new rods are better than most anglers. But too often, the only itch they scratch is consumerism. It takes time for the atoms to infiltrate muscle and memory. Thankfully, it's a lengthy merger that's all pleasure and discovery—otherwise known as flyfishing.

So, when the time eventually comes, parting can be very difficult. Beware: O'Brien reported a case in which bicycle and policeman exchanged more than fifty percent of their atoms. Keep a rod too long, and you may find that when you finally put it on eBay, it's the rod that has sold you.

RICHARD WILSON *is a former BBC Environment correspondent and a lifelong flyfisher and conservationist.*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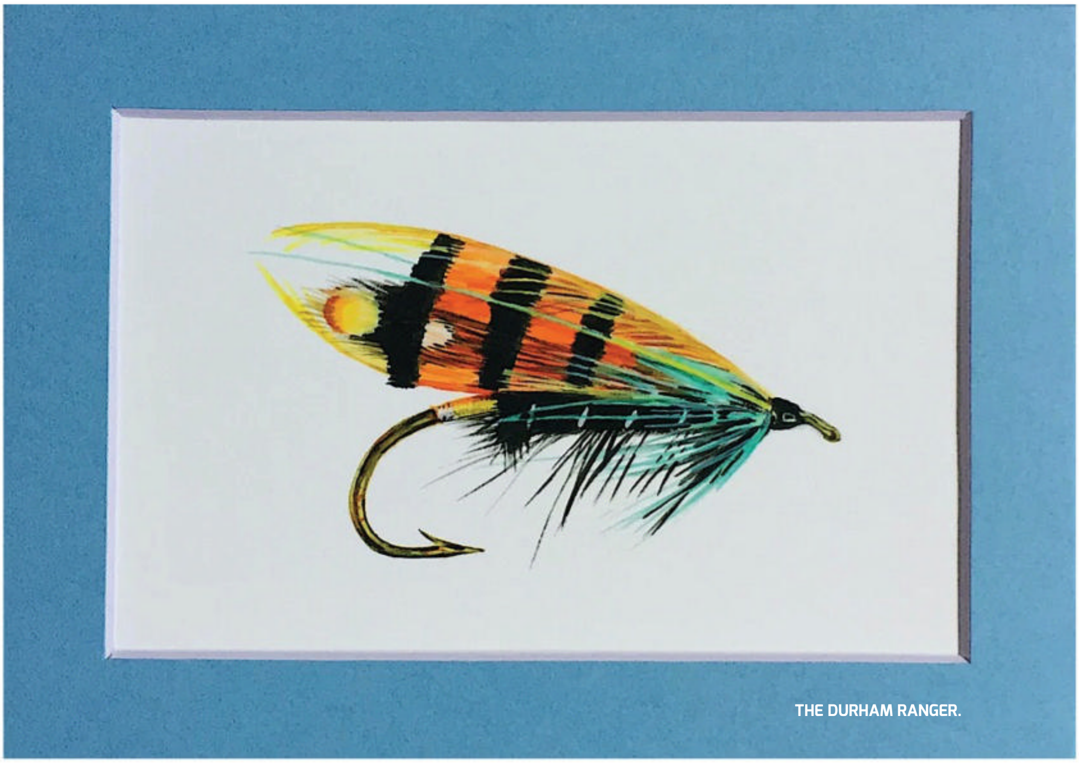

THE DURHAM RANGER.

KORENA SCHLEGEL

Tomatoes and Tuukka

The evolution of a family man BY JOHANNES BULFIN

WHILE DEALING WITH a tumultuous time in my early parenting life, I vented, bitched, and moaned to a family psychologist. How I felt trapped; how each day seemed an endless roundabout of work, chores, and trying not to be an asshole father; how I needed fishing; how there surely had to be something in this absurd rat race for me.

"You have made your choices, and this is your life now," she replied. "You have responsibilities, and you shouldn't shirk them."

Sucker-punch. Jesus wept. And for a time, I hated her. But, with time, I did accept shouldering that responsibility and not feeling bitter about it.

One late summer day, my wife Rebecca asked me to make a trellis for her tomato plants that were struggling out on our balcony. Our tiny city apartment wasn't exactly flush with options in this regard. So I dug out an old nine-weight and an even older five-weight, neither of which I had used in a long time. I lashed them together and jammed the open ferrules into the dirt while wallowing in my own sorrow. Rebecca stared at the "trellis" for a moment, then turned and kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks," she said, before returning to our kitchenette.

I watched the tomatoes grow, leaning on my rods for support. Autumn came and killed them off before they ever really ripened properly. Autumn killed off a piece of me too, as it does every year. Trout season was now closed, which was depressing. Even though I hadn't been trout fishing anyway, knowing I now couldn't legally go added another level of gloom. The nine-weight was never a trout rod, though, and I felt obliged to offer up penance for the horticultural misuse.

I called Tuukka, my one remaining fish-bum friend. No kids, no girlfriend, a truly shitty car, and a fabulous collection of fishing tackle. I invited him to go pike fishing later that afternoon.

"I'll be there," he replied without hesitation. The only surprise being that he wasn't already on the water somewhere.

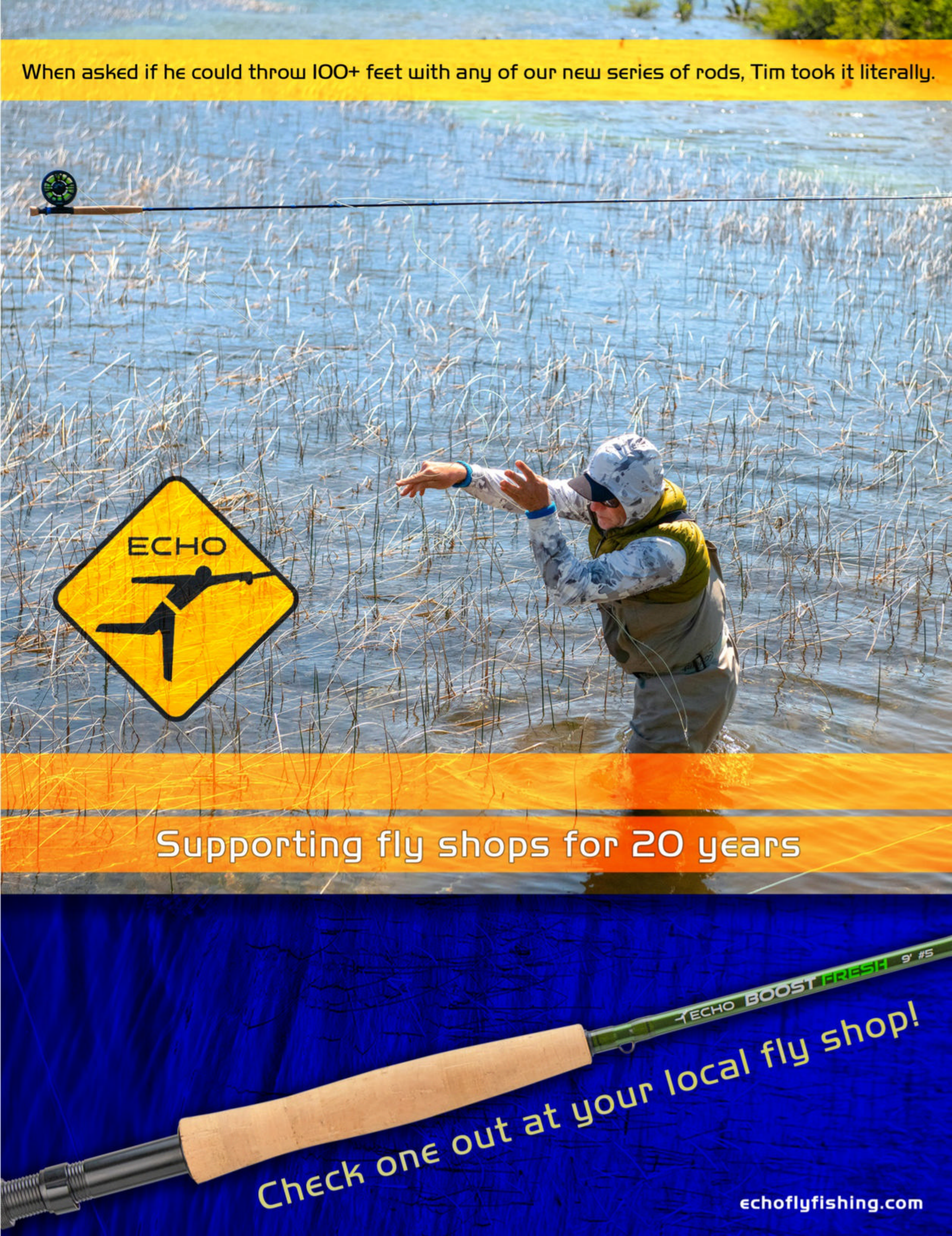
Tuukka fishes with specific objectives. The previous summer he'd decided he was going to land an Atlantic salmon on a two-handed rod, swinging a Durham Ranger (he said he liked the blue in it). So, he slept by the river, showered occasionally at a truck stop, and fished until he did it. It was a stunning fish—deep, silver, and weighing enough to satisfy even Tuukka. So much so that he sold the two-hander, kept the fly, and bought a bait-caster.

I fished my nine-weight, and Tuukka cast his gigantic softbaits from a permanently discolored fiberglass rowboat. As a cloud passed in front of the sun, Tuukka said, "Expect a hit, now." He has that sixth sense. Sure enough, everything locked up on my retrieve and my rod bent over. The fish stayed deep, and I ecstatically applied more pressure than I had in ages, eventually gliding the fish over the rim of the net. Thirty-seven inches, and a grip-and-grin for the memory bank.

Tuukka lit his pipe—the other remnant of his double-handed spey-casting phase. I sat back and relaxed as we talked for a bit. I told him I was expecting a daughter. He said he was going to move up north, permanently. He confided that he was envious of the "solid fundamentals" in my life—a wife, children, and a job I didn't hate. I smiled wryly and said I was jealous of the freedom and elasticity of his.

So our paths diverged again, as a true fish bum's and a family man's inevitably must. The last I heard he had quit both social media and his new job, and was entirely focused on drop-shotting for zander—a Eurasian pike-perch similar to a walleye. He'd attained some impressive results, all recorded in a leather-bound logbook.

JOHANNES BULFIN *enjoys Irish rivers, streamers, and euro nymphing. He loathes tippet rings, bulky chest-packs, and the Ford Focus.*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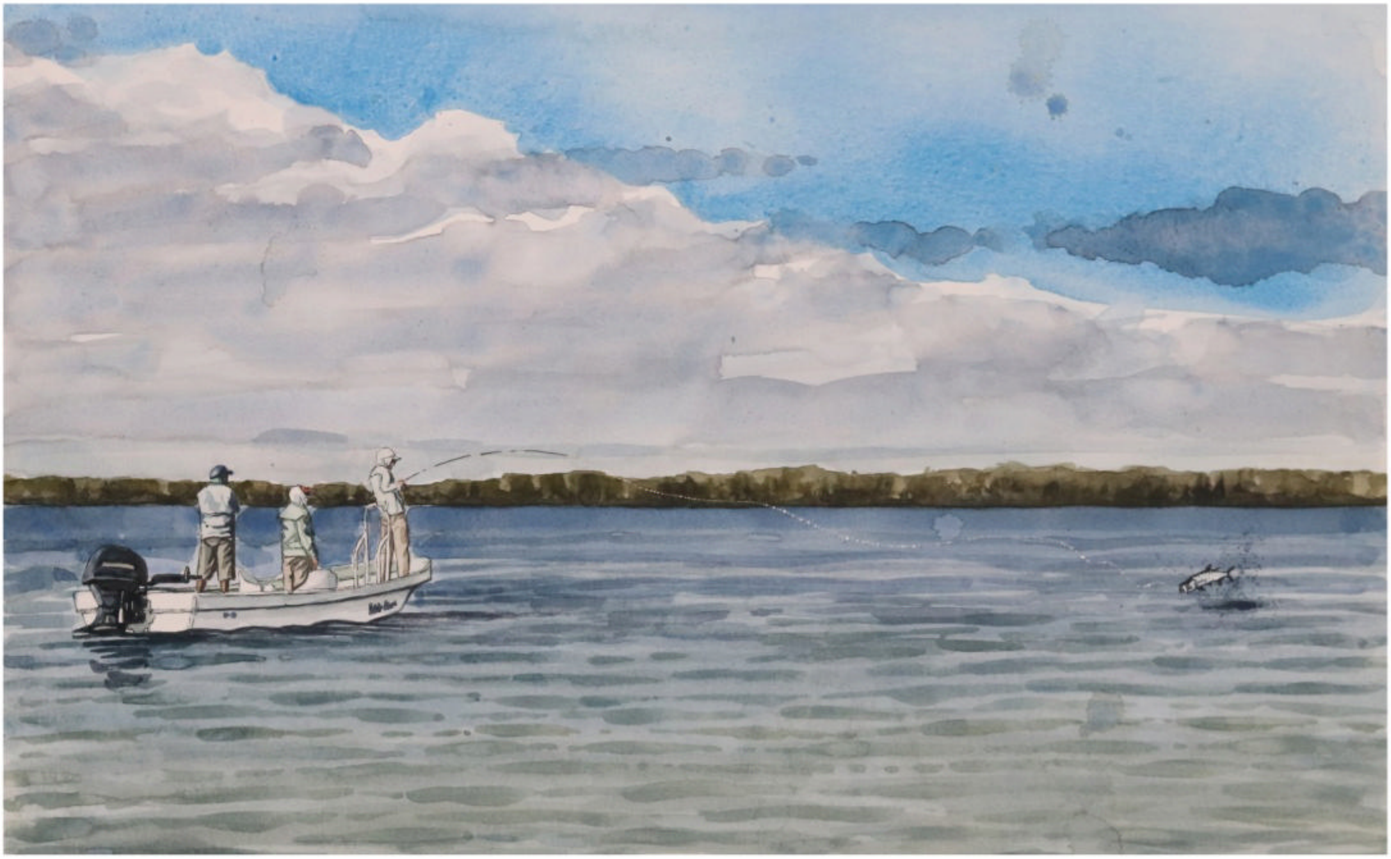

PAUL PUCKETT

Handshake Before Goodbye

Baby tarpon on the northern Yucatan coast BY WILL RICE

WHEN FLYFISHER TYPES touch down in Cancun, they typically head south to do one of three things: take a shot at their first bonefish in Ascension Bay; attend a hipster wedding or tequila tasting in Tulum; or head down for a few sporty DIY days of casting to nervous permit on the flats of Xcalak.

All three have potential, but we chose the route less double-hauled. We went north, to Tarpon Cay Lodge in Rio Lagartos, a coastal village on the Rio Lagartos lagoon sitting just over three hours from Cancun.

Ascension Bay is an excellent home for bonefish and permit, but if you're looking for five- to twenty-pound baby tarpon—certain times of year even full-grown adults—and the occasional snook or 'cuda, the north coast of the Yucatan Peninsula stretching from Holbox southwest to Campeche is the place to be.

While the popularity of Yucatan's north coast has waxed and waned over the years, this somewhat off-the-radar fishery stretching across the 233-square-mile Rio Lagartos Biosphere Reserve still gets only a fraction of the visitors Ascension Bay sees each year. But that doesn't make its scrappy tarpon any easier to catch, which I quickly learned from the bow of an eighteen-foot panga our first morning on the water.

The "juvenile" tarpon (sounds better than *baby* tarpon) hit my fly just inside the mouth of a small lagoon tucked deep into the mangroves. I passed the first test by keeping my rod tip down and strip-setting the fish, but instead of going airborne or darting back into the mangroves for cover—two rather typical tarpon responses—it decided to run directly toward us.

"Strip-strip-strip!" my guide enthusiastically directed. "Stay tight!" And I *did* manage to stay tight as it plowed toward the boat, but this quickly resulted in the end of my fly line being stripped back to the eyelets. Then the fish exploded from the water and, instead of "bowing to the prince," I raised my tip. This put too much slack in my line, and one acrobatic leap was enough for her to throw the hook. The tarpon landed with a crash on the water and my unconnected fly landed softly a second later.

"How'd that feel?" my buddy sarcastically asked from the back of the boat. The sun had just risen and was low on the horizon.

"How do you *think* it felt?" I replied through gritted teeth. "Fun while it lasted." As the saying goes, "there are a thousand ways to not catch a tarpon." I'd just learned one of them.

Tarpon Cay is one of four destinations offered by Marco Ruz, owner/operator of Yucatan Fly Fishing Adventures. The other three are located in the city of Campeche (four-and-a-half hours south of Rio Lagartos), Isla Blanca (just north of Cancun), and Isla Del Sabalo, about a hundred miles north of Campeche. In Rio Lagartos, Ruz uses the Yuum Ha Hotel as headquarters, which is conveniently located just a few steps from the departure dock.

When our group of six were planning this trip, we had three primary requirements: a place none of us had fished; a challenging saltwater species to target; and a spot with minimal angling pressure to maximize shots. Tarpon Cay Lodge fit the bill, and it had a six-day opening. "This is a tarpon nursery where you can see all of their growth-cycles," says Ruz. "From smaller fish in the wetlands, to resident fish on the flats, to the larger migratory fish."

Don't be mistaken: Juvenile tarpon can still be very challenging, especially those tucked way in the back of a skinny mangrove tunnel. But if you've never fished for tarpon at all, this is a far more forgiving game—and a far more affordable option—than booking days in May to chase 150-pounders in the Keys. A few guys on our trip had never taken a shot at tarpon before, and they were thoroughly challenged—taking the shot, making the presentation work, setting the hook, and landing the fish.

Juveniles—(yes, baby tarpon)—spend much of their time in protected estuaries where they have fewer large predators. At one point we eyed an eight-to-ten-pound tarpon hugging a mangrove for cover. As a group of baitfish moved into the kill zone it ambushed them in an explosion.

Tarpon Cay Lodge has a unique fishing program, with most days being split into morning and afternoon sessions. Each morning began around 4:45 with coffee and breakfast. By 6 we were motoring out and by 6:15 to 6:30 we were fishing. At 11 a.m. we headed back to the lodge for lunch and a siesta, and then we were back at it again for a 4-7 p.m. evening session. Operators offering a mid-day break are rare, and I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated it.

Our group eventually worked out the technical kinks and fish were being landed during nearly every session. Another benefit to smaller tarpon: Instead of fighting an adult for thirty to forty minutes, our battles lasted seven to ten and we were back on the bow looking for the next one.

On the last hour of my last evening, a fish that had ignored the fly on my first cast ate it on the second. Then it shot from the water and did a backflip four feet in the air. This time I'd done everything just right, but the fish was gone anyway.

"That was the handshake before goodbye," my buddy said. "Pretty sure it's his way of telling you that it's time for you to move along."

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"WOULD BE NICE TO HAVE MY LEG MUSCLES BACK."

The Question

Why would the answer change? BY DEE FINKEL

WHEN I FIRST MOVED to Western Massachusetts I was learning local waters on foot, searching for wild trout among the slippery boulder fields that the great glaciers had left behind. Using the Mohawk Trail to slip through the mountains between two watersheds, I sometimes saw guide trucks carrying rubber rafts—a much easier tool for covering water than the difficult wading I kept encountering. At times thunderous, always unrelenting, these rivers were in a league with the craggy Ausable in the Adirondacks, a far cry from the friendly, lazy waterways of the Catskills that I'd fished until now.

Admittedly, I was having a tough time. I used to fish every week of the year, all day long, and often into the night. It was nothing for me to cover several miles in a day. Now I needed to rest when I reached each spot, and I wasn't fishing nearly as thoroughly—a natural result of hormone-replacement therapy: My muscles started to melt faster than expected. If people only knew how much we're losing just trying to be ourselves.

The physical struggles weren't what bothered me most. When I came out as trans, a lot of people asked if I was going to stop fishing, and the question annoyed me. Why would I stop fishing? It's in my blood as much as any other angler. My car smells like wet boots and there are loose flies everywhere. The floors in my apartment shimmer with the trimmings of fly-tying material. I've picked strands of maribou off my work clothes in meetings.

Nobody meant any harm in the question, but thinking about why they asked it was predictably depressing and unhelpful. The only answer was to lead by example and keep fishing as hard as I could. However, this muscle-melt and general lack of energy from losing testosterone was becoming a problem.

My new physical reality hit me one fall weekend in the Catskills while fishing with friends. I was showing them a few spots via some torturous walks through sloshing tribs, dense woods, jungles of knotweed, and of course the rivers themselves. It was cold and misting at times. I knew I should take it easy, so I just watched for most of the day, eventually swinging wets in a glassy tailout through chattering teeth at last light. By morning I was feeling beaten-down. After leading our group on a modest trek to another location, I was so tired that I walked back to the car and slept. Laying there trying to doze, I grinded my teeth thinking about the question. The next morning I took a friend to a choice riffle and pulled streamers until I caught a pissed-off seventeen-inch 'bow, thus providing a satisfying answer; the only answer necessary.

The hard part is that I'm the type who believes you're only as good as your last outing. It's winter now and I haven't fished in months. I think of Captain Willard at the beginning of *Apocalypse Now*, when he's wasted in the hotel. "Every minute I stay in this room," he says, "I get weaker. And every minute Charlie squats in the bush, he gets stronger." I want to go squat in the bush. Instead, I sit here and stare out the window.

Though I haven't been fishing much lately, I am spending a lot of time casting a semi-parabolic rod in my backyard. The action of the taper provides the cast with an extra kick of momentum as the stiffer tip section catches up to the softer butt section, propelling the line farther than I've ever cast before.

There's a riffle on the Beaverkill that flows over a shifting gravel bar before crashing hard against the face of a steep rock wall. On the far side, just before the current plunges against the rock, there's a soft, ebbing seam where a big brown likes to sit and pick off cripples in the bubble line. This fish has always been just out of my reach, no matter the flow. As I stand in my yard, consistently casting beyond my previously farthest distance, think about the question. No, I can't fish the same way I once did. But I'm going to catch trout that I could never reach before.

DEE FINKEL *is a trout bum from Massachusetts who has written for* The Flyfish Journal *and* Metro Paper. *When not fishing, she is scouring eBay for old rods, or tying more streamers than she'll ever use.*

JEFFREY ADAMS

YETI
BUILT FOR THE WILD.

Ambassador David Mangum

ONE OF MANY OBSTACLES TO BE FOUND ON KODIAK ISLAND.

JIM KLUG

Scotty, Guardian Angel

Biting through Maxima on Kodiak Island BY JOE DAHUT

THE HEAT PUSHING OFF THE ENGINE was obvious, radiating through the vents and steaming up the windshield. “Are all those lights usually on like that?” asked one of the clients, who was deeply concerned with the health of our vehicle, but also with my casual response to the flurry of warning lights that flashed when I keyed the ignition.

I assured him and his friend that there was nothing to worry about because this rig had been through much worse. Both of them seemed irrationally at ease trusting the words of a twenty-two-year-old first-year guide with no knowledge of cars. But at least I could blab about intercepting a migration of salmon as old as Earth itself, which kept them entertained while we waited for help.

There were two options, I was told. The first was Ray, who looked like one of Santa’s helpers, and who could fable for hours about the second coming of an Alaskan gold rush. The second was Drunk Scotty—patron saint of this two-track trail—and his even drunker helper, Kyle, who always wore a neon construction vest despite never working construction. Each time I saw Kyle, I had to reintroduce myself. Maybe he forgot, maybe he didn’t like me. While we waited for Drunk Scotty and Kyle, the lodge manager came to pick up our clients and drop off Tyler, the other guide, for reinforcement. Fishing would have to wait until tomorrow.

“You came to Alaska without ever shooting a gun?” Scotty asked when he arrived, cocking his before laying it in the backseat. I rearranged the dirt at my feet, keeping my hands in the fleece center-console-pocket of my waders while watching brown bears corral slow salmon in the shallows. Having no vehicular knowledge, I endured the silence as Scotty connected cables to the battery of our rig. Anything I could have said would have been a farce.

“Think she’ll be alright?” I finally asked, trying to change the subject. The battery wasn’t the problem.

“Let’s go back to my place, I think I have the part for this,” Scotty stated in an almost sober epiphany. There was one four-wheeler, one side-by-side, two drunk drivers, two sober guides, and three seats. Tyler rode with Kyle, as decided by seniority. Scotty nodded his head at me, motioning to the back of his four-wheeler. “It’s nuts to butt,” Scotty burped, interrupting my train of thought—*Do I hold his hips? Hold onto the seat? Should I wait for him to get on?*

Nuts to butt. The other three laughed. It was a three-mile ride from our dead rig to his house. Scotty’s dog, Kona, was waiting for him at the edge of his property. Much to Kona’s delight, Scotty gunned the engine to race the dog up the driveway. A bonfire awaited, and Scotty sank into his faded lawn chair, missing a few slats in the back. Kyle and Tyler arrived soon after and joined us around the fire. An unlit cigarette dangling from the corner of Scotty’s mouth rose and fell when he breathed. He popped open a Coors Lite and dipped his head into the fire like a heron in a stream, just long enough to light his cigarette. Puffing thick smoke, he peered out at Ugak Bay, the coastline he has watched from that very lawn chair for forty years. Everyone around the fire had raccoon eyes, formed partly from long days in the sun and partly by dirt from the trail. It was so quiet, even the fire's crackle seemed obtrusively loud. I would've felt rude reminding them of the broken car, so I sat in silence, staring at the fire and watching both drivers drink more beer.

Scotty leaned his head back in his chair, wanting nothing more than to sit and smoke and drink his Coors. The car could wait. An iridescence caught my eye every time he exhaled. There was something else between his lips: a piece of 20-pound Maxima, stuck between his teeth.

I'm still not certain to this day if Scotty was real. In all my fishing, I don't know if I ever met someone as simple, yet cryptic. There was a man in State College, Pa., who greased the ferrules of an old bamboo rod between his nose and cheek bone. He told me where to cast when he caught me staring. There was another in Naples, Fla., dragging his kayak from the mud to grab another six pack for his cooler. Along the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, there was a big man bombing a double-haul into the black, polluted night of the East River. We exchanged fly boxes, complimenting the other's deer-hair work.

But none of them were Scotty, a mythical man in Kodiak running his four-wheeler along the trails, picking up trash, watching for salmon poachers, and saving guides from broken-down rigs. He's never been paid for doing it. You'd likely never even meet Scotty unless you found yourself in trouble. If Kodiak's backcountry trails had a guardian angel, it was Scotty—smoking Camels, wearing his gun outside his shirt, driving a four-wheeler with a seat covered in bear marks unidentifiable as teeth or claws. He and his rig both caked with mud, unapologetically. His wardrobe: camouflage or blaze. Biting through Maxima to pass the time.

JOE DAHUT *lives, writes, and teaches from the Florida Keys.*

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A Different Nation

War music and 'vibing' for steelhead with Matt Mendes BY ERIC JOHNSON

THE CABIN OF THE TRUCK is booming with tribal chants and is illuminated only by various maintenance-malfunction lights. It is 5 a.m. in October, somewhere on the 640,000-acre Warm Springs Reservation in the frigid high desert of Central Oregon, when fishing guide Matt Mendes stubs out his cigarette and takes the wheel. He drives past his child's mini four-wheeler, antler sheds in the lawn, and a porta potty, then down dark tribal roads for several long minutes before feeling the need to turn on his headlights.

MATT MENDES, READY TO SWING.

ARIAN STEVENS (3)

MANY STEELHEADING DAYS START EARLY AND END LATE.

I ask what we're listening to.

Matt seems confused. "Indian music."

"I'm asking…what it's about, what are they saying?"

"War music," he says. "They're saying, 'let's swing a steelhead.'"

We laugh. Matt flashes his smile. He is a man of understated looks and gestures. Quick takes and short sentences. He is six-foot-two, with butt-length black hair rolled up under his hoodie, and silver on his fingers and wrist. As a spey guru, Matt seems most interested when finding the unconscious repetitive smoothness in the cast-swing-step method—"vibing," as he puts it.

NOTHING LIKE GOOD INDIAN MUSIC TO START YOUR DAY.

Sunlight climbs over the ridge, showcasing an endless expanse of beige hills, basalt cliffs, sage, irrigated alfalfa, and sporadic fir and cottonwood stands. Matt periodically stops the truck, grabs binoculars, and scans a draw or saddle for elk.

Our war music is interrupted by a public service announcement about STDs. Matt switches to country. We bounce along an anti-road toward the Deschutes River. Matt is putting us in Moody's first. My friend Chris—a Portland piscator also obsessed with the Buffalo Bills, gastronomy, and America's fractured democracy—is starting in the riffle, and me in a grease above. I enter the narcotic trance of the dawn swing. At one point, I get a good grab but couldn't move the fish again.

Back at the truck, I consider how I feel being a white man buying my way back in time. We are not merely fishing on remote land, or private land, but in a different *nation*. We could not be here without Matt's permission. I dwell on the genocidal trajectory of the white man's exploits in the West. Then, on solitude. We toggled past thirteen other boats and maybe thirty bank anglers yesterday while floating from U.S. soil; today, we see nobody apart from the occasional long-distance rafter bobbing by, and anglers fishing the white man's side of the river.

Meanwhile Matt is discussing with rhetorical authority which swing spot we should try next. He seems to decide that perhaps he'll try to drown us.

He wants to put me in Pitcher's Mound, a patch of elevated

FISH ON! MENDES AT THE READY.

mush surrounded in every direction but reverse by a bottomless abyss of moving river. He explains how this works: You slide into the river, immediately chest deep, and shuffle inch by inch for several feet until your toes feel a slightly elevated mound the size of an overturned dinner bowl, and then step on top of it. “You don’t move,” Matt says. “Cast, swing, two more pulls of line, cast again. Jack as much line as you can.” A step beyond the mound, or to either side, and you’re swimming.

I make many excuses. Chris takes it and doesn’t fall in.

Matt then insists I fish Rock Garden, a football-field expanse of waist-deep riffle choked by submerged boulders that must be climbed over. Eventually, you make it to a less-terrible spine of rocks you can wobble down until the tailout. “Low body. Slow steps,” he explains. I stumble and twist outward. I laugh—it’s an absurd wade. I make a cigarettes-in-the-hat joke. Matt doesn’t laugh. He asks again if I have cleats.

“You are going to work out to that massive rock,” he points with the net. I squint into the sun’s glare over the endless tumbling whitewater. I recall watching Chris attempt the same feat last year; he ended up floating down the river like a dropped beer can.

I send a snap T. It isn’t terrible.

Matt gestures for me to venture out farther. I look at him.

“This is a big boy run,” Matt hollers from shore.

“I’m not a big boy. I’m a little boy.”

He doesn’t laugh. He moves off the bank, appears to glide over the rocks to my side, and essentially hoists me up at the back of my waders, moving and placing me downstream between casts like a chess piece, my legs glancing over the rocks in moon-jumping puppetry.

Chris stops fishing to watch this and prepare many insults. I land a trout by accident.

We hike back to the truck in the high sun, looking for arrowheads where a wildfire cleared a patch of sagebrush. I point out a turkey’s bobbing head in the distance. Matt says it’s just a darkened branch on a small pine. “It’s sleep deprivation and heat,” Matt says, referring to our habit of race-drinking the night before steelheading, and the high UV-index on his watch.

As we drive to the next run, Matt stops the truck to show us a herd of wild horses, resting under the shade of two trees in a sprawling fire-blackened bowl. We marvel at their grace until the giant Appaloosa, his manhood swinging in the afternoon sun, attempts to mount one of the mares. She rebuffs him twice by hop-dancing on her hind legs. After a few seconds, the stallion is gathering himself to try again, and Matt drives off to let nature play out.

Our conversation shifts to what things were like here before the collapse of the iconic Pacific steelhead runs. Matt reflects. His grandfather taught him to swing flies when he was 13. He is now 32. He tells me that, at the end of the ’90s, he could swing a steelhead in every run he stopped to fish. “It was 100 percent,” he says. His best day was seventeen steelhead to hand. He went

ARIAN STEVENS (3)

STEALTH, AND STRONG LEGS, DO HELP ON THE DESCHUTES.

home and told his grandfather, who chuckled and told Matt his best day was twenty-six.

Given the depressed steelhead runs in Columbia River tributaries, Chris and I are elated with one fish apiece. He plucked his out of a sluggish pool with virtually no room for a D-loop, and mine fell to a black and blue marabou tube fly swung below a rock in a fast riffle.

Matt says he will join us in the last run. He is throwing a fourteen-foot Meiser rod, his tribe's colors embedded in the cork. Downtempo beats rise from his phone.

WHAT ALL THE FUSS IS ABOUT.

His spey casting is uncommonly animated. He pivots and shifts his frame as if executing an easy layup. His line transitions from air to water imperceptibly. After that, he leans into a Statue of Liberty-like stance as he sets his swing path, holding the cork at times only between his thumb and pointer. On every cast, you can see that he expects a fish.

He yells to me that a steelhead rolled downstream. I cover the water, then Matt does. We never see the fish again.

Back at Matt's house it is eighty degrees and we're down to our sun shirts, peeling off waders. We hide from the heat in his garage to exchange fish pictures and payment. A buck's head on Matt's garage floor has shed a pool of blood and is starting to smell. Matt's daughter and son, ages 2 and 5, are eating ice cream and running around the yard. Meanwhile, Matt's wife assists in freeing the rods I tangled on the hood rack, while Chris marvels at how I could have possibly failed at such a simple task.

Two days of steelheading and only a few other things went terribly wrong. I snapped my rod trying to launch a D-loop hooked on a dead branch behind me, and later stabbed by thumb on an exotic riverside shrub. Chris put his iPhone in a coma.

"Did we cover the water OK today?" I ask, as we watch fish-release videos huddled around Matt's phone.

"For sure, guys," Matt says. "Most of the day, I felt like I was fishing through you."

THE BOAT DOCKS AT BRAYS ISLAND, S.C.

COURTESY BRAYS (3)

Happy Days at Brays

Redfish and largemouth in South Carolina BY TOM BIE

I'M NOT A SOUTHERNER. And my steelhead addiction likely means that I'll never become one. But if I *was* to ever leave the West for the culture and food and fishing of Dixie, South Carolina would be high on my list. And the two days I spent fishing on and around Brays Island last spring did nothing to change that assessment.

Sitting roughly halfway between historic Charleston, S.C., and the beaches of Savannah, GA, spread across 5,500 luscious Lowcountry acres, Brays is ideally situated to back up its claim as "America's premier sporting community." But even after accounting for the golf, the shooting sports, the food, and the pickleball (of course), Brays' marketers might be underselling it.

I came to chase redfish, naturally, planning to share heroic stories of my multi-fish days on these very pages. But, alas, my early-March arrival coincided with a cold front. While we saw plenty of reds darting around the abundant tidal creeks and salty marshes of Port Royal Sound, their stubborn lockjaw, combined with my Colorado-rusty casting, had resulted in a rather slow morning.

When we stopped for lunch, my guide wasn't exactly bullish on our afternoon prospects. And yet, sitting on a skiff in sunny South Carolina, knowing that it was snowing back in Denver, I would've happily spent the afternoon continuing to not catch redfish. Besides, my alternatives were nine holes or a horsey ride at the equestrian center. Then my guide's phone rang.

"It's for you."

Turns out, redfish aren't the only quarry worth chasing at Brays. The man calling was Chad McClure, who works in sales and marketing at Brays, but who I knew from his former job as an editor with *Gray's Sporting Journal* and *American Angler*. My guide handed me his phone and Chad—with knowledge of the morning's nonexistent redfish bite—got right to the point: "You wanna go catch some bass?"

Indeed I did. The property at Brays includes a number of saltwater ponds that, when the tides and temperatures are right, can offer the chance to stand on manicured grass and cast to thirty-pound cruising redfish. Neither the tides nor the temperatures were right that afternoon, but I was fine with that, because my mind had already switched to largemouth.

Nearly ninety percent of the property at Brays Island is shared among the homeowners. Take a tour around, and you will see wildflowers, towering oaks, tidal ponds, jasmine shrubs and vines, a golf course, a sporting-clays course, an archery course, rifle and pistol ranges, and an impressive amount of preserved common space. Best of all, scattered around the landscape are some twenty or so freshwater lakes filled with largemouth.

After grabbing some gear from my room in Brays' Georgian-style guest mansion, I met up with Paul Burton, a native South African who works as head broker and knows the property's largemouth lakes as well as anyone. Paul had a few errands to run, so he drove me to a structure-filled lake, pointed out

SUPERB REDFISHING
IS THE MAIN DRAW...

some of the better bucketmouth hidey-holes, then left me with my frog popper to explore the water.

No matter where I walked around the lake, not a single house was visible in any direction. Creating this feeling of solitude was part of the vision that Cuban cattle rancher Sumner Pingree had when he first purchased the island in 1973. Nearly fifteen years later, Pingree teamed with noted landscape architect Robert Marvin to devise a unique real estate offering at Brays: three-hundred-and-twenty-five scenic, secluded, and circular, one-acre lots. Most of the remaining acreage was protected for wildlife, or used for farming, nature trails, or ponds like the one I was now fishing.

Like a lot of mature bass water, almost every inch of shore looked productive. And much of it was. I soon found the kind of bass I was seeking. The next morning, Paul found us even bigger ones, in a lake with a community rowboat sitting on shore, just waiting for us both.

...BUT THE LARGEMOUTH PONDS
ARE WELL WORTH THE EFFORT.

MAGDA SMITH

Trees can tell the story

SPRUCES

BY GEORGE ROGERS

Drive around Anchorage and you will see weed shops and pawnshops, drive-thru espresso huts and homeless shelters, breweries and Baptist churches. You'll also see specialty stores: Alaska Fashion Wigs, The Ammo Can, Granny's Guns—all of them scattered over a sprawling grid of city streets laid out like the squares of a gill net.

But as you climb above the city, into the foothills of the Chugach Mountains, that grid begins to unravel, giving way to a tangle of hairpin turns, gravel roads, and switchbacks that curl higher into the hills. Up here you'll find the trophy homes, where you can look down over it all, onto a city that many find beautiful only from this distance.

Anchorage, like so many cities, is also full of broken men. When I pulled into town they were there at the intersections, with their cardboard signs and sometimes their wives, camped out on the medians holding out hope and empty coffee cans—all brittle teeth and denim, empty wallets chained to pant loops, staring your way as you idle at the light, hoping your eyes will meet theirs and see in them something that looks like you.

I was in Anchorage because I needed a chainsaw and it looked as if I wasn't going to find one. Apparently this wasn't the first time that all the chainsaws had been stolen from the Anchorage Lowes, taken during store hours in broad daylight, with shoppers and cashiers watching while the sirens wailed. They took every saw within reach: the Husqvarnas, the Stihls—even the discount brands that no one prefers and the cheap electric ones guys from the suburbs buy.

In Alaska—especially now, with thousands of acres covered in dead and dying spruces—stolen saws are easy to flip. And if you're desperate, this is something that you know. So by the time I got there the only saw I could see was a cabled-down demo stripped of its chain and bar and gas cap, a husk of a saw left for dead, like a parted-out pickup. But they had one more: a Stihl sitting up high that hadn't been stripped. I paid for the saw and headed north—out of Anchorage—toward my cabin and the little town of Cantwell, leaving the pawn brokers, panhandlers, and pot shops behind.

SPRUCE TREES CAN MOST EASILY BE DISTINGUISHED FROM OTHER CONIFERS BY THIER FOUR-SIDED NEEDLES. ALSO, MATURE SPRUCE CONES—AS WITH PINES—HANG DOWN. FIR CONES POINT UPWARD.

ANCHORAGE BY NIGHT. (OR AT LEAST, AS "NIGHT" AS IT GETS HERE IN LATE SPRING MONTHS.) THE CITY MAY NOT—WITH ITS STRIP MALLS AND WEED SHOPS AND DRIVE-THRU ESPRESSO STANDS—LOOK LIKE "THE LAST FRONTIER." BUT YOU CAN AT LEAST GET THERE FROM HERE.

JACOB BOOMSMA

David Peterson is a big man. Before booking with me, he'd asked if I had waders in a size 13, and when I told him I did, he'd said that his only other concern was that his wife was 68 and she was unsteady on her feet. What David didn't tell me was that he was 83 and wasn't particularly steady either. He also didn't tell me that he really didn't care much about flyfishing. This wasn't that unusual, as folks are sometimes looking for more than just fishing. David Peterson was one of them.

Cantwell, Alaska, is a town of gravel airstrips and end-of-the-road thinkers: hippies, growers, drinkers, anti-government types, mushers, pilots, and conspiracy seekers—all of them surrounded by the kind of mountains that make your heart hurt when you leave. When you look up, you see Cessnas flying through the clouds and North America's largest mountain—like a god—standing in the distance. It's a view that makes visitors stop and consider their life choices. It makes them think about buying land, building their own cabin, shooting moose, and embracing the long dark winters, free of their boss back home in Ohio or Delaware or whichever rule-bound place they're from. That's because Cantwell is an astonishingly beautiful place.

But when I pulled into town last summer, I could see this was changing. The bark beetles had arrived. It's something that those of us who spend time here have seen coming for years. Some of us hoped that Cantwell's elevation or brutal winters would have stopped them. But it hadn't. They'd gnawed their way, steadily and inexorably, toward us. And now they were here.

It wasn't the beetles we cared so much about, or even the dead spruces—though they are brown and everywhere now—but the fire that we knew would one day come. We worried about that fire because there's a swath of dead spruces stretching from the Kenai north to Cantwell, hundreds of square miles of tinder and fuel, and some of it has already burned, running hard and hot through those dead trees and towns to the south, burning cabins and homes and giving us a good look at what may some day be our fire, too.

My son and I have seen it firsthand. It was three years ago now—the Swan Lake Fire. We were floating the upper Kenai for rainbows and dollies, and as we drifted downstream we could smell smoke in the distance, but neither of us gave it much thought as it's easy to get distracted by that river. It is deep and glacial-blue and full of fish and I can picture losing myself in it—mesmerized by the water—unaware that a fire might be burning down on me, which is sort of what happened.

I don't remember the fishing being particularly good that day. We gave up on rainbows and started swinging for sockeyes, even though there weren't many fish in the river just yet. But we could see them—lines of them starting to stack up along the current breaks and the few fish we did hook came out of the river quick and bright, taking to the sky again and again.

I remember looking up later that night and noticing a gathering darkness in the distance. This was odd because, down on the Kenai, the sky is often blue like the river—but not that night. We had no idea that the wind was about to shift, hard and unexpectedly. If we had, we would've gotten the hell out of there instead of hiking back down to the river to catch a small salmon for the grill. Fresh sockeye filets are the color of ripe watermelon and all that fish needed was a good shake of salt and the smoke from our campfire. We fell asleep with the breeze still blowing light and easy through our tent.

> IT WASN'T THE BEETLES WE CARED SO MUCH ABOUT, OR EVEN THE DEAD SPRUCES—THOUGH THEY ARE BROWN AND EVERYWHERE NOW—BUT THE FIRE THAT WE KNEW WOULD ONE DAY COME.

It was four a.m. when the trooper woke us. He stood over our tent with a Maglite, telling us that we had an hour to get out and not a minute more. By now our vestibule was snapping hard in the wind, and we tossed what we could into the bed of our raft and shoved everything else—tent, sleeping bags, rods, wet socks, a walking stick my son had carved—into the truck. As we pulled out of the campground we could see flames in the trees and black smoke rolling above the river. The route north was already closed, so we spent five days south of the fire waiting for the road to open. When it did we drove home past a blackened campground. The dead spruces had gone up like Roman candles, the smoke still rising from the forest floor as we drove by, rising up from what looked liked cracks in the earth itself, with orange fire still here and there like marigolds on the hillsides. Hotshot crews sat roadside on their packs, with shovels and chainsaws at their feet, and the cold blue Kenai flowing through the middle of it all.

JUNE OF 2019 WAS THE SECOND-HOTTEST IN ALASKA'S HISTORY. ON THE FIFTH DAY OF THE MONTH, LIGHTNING STARTED THE SWAN LAKE FIRE ON SE ALASKA'S KENAI NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE. IT LASTED UNTIL FALL, EVENTUALLY BURNING AROUND 170,000 ACRES.

GEMME WINSTON

When I pick up David and Jan Peterson, it's immediately obvious that David knows he's 83, but lives as if he doesn't believe it. His hands are broad like his smile and he uses both with ease—putting a hand on my shoulder and fixing me with his big grin, assuring me without saying a word that to him I'm no longer a stranger.

He's wearing a Seattle Sombrero, and his wife Jan stands beside him, waving, triumphantly holding her umbrella high as if it were something she'd once lost and just now found. It is forty degrees and raining big cold drops straight and steady, the type of rain that says there's a cold front parked over you that's not going anywhere soon.

David tells me they're from Hawaii and I ask him how he feels about snow in August as he pulls himself into my SUV. He tells me with a delighted face that he would be thrilled to see snow in August, adding—with a clap of his hands—that he's here for an adventure. "We're yours for the day," he says. Congenial and gracious and game for whatever the day might bring, David is ready to go. I then help Jan slowly pull herself up and into my backseat as she hands me her umbrella—a frail defense against the Alaskan sky. As I turn up the heat for my new Hawaiian friends, they share that Jan has never fished and that David last picked up a rod seventy years ago.

AS I TURN UP THE HEAT FOR MY NEW HAWAIIAN FRIENDS, THEY SHARE THAT JAN HAS NEVER FISHED, AND THAT DAVID LAST PICKED UP A ROD SEVENTY YEARS AGO.

Back at my cabin I outfit them in waders and they marvel at this additional layer of protection against the rain. I give them each a hiking pole and introduce them to my son who'll be an extra set of hands, primarily to make sure that neither of them ends up in the creek.

We practice casting beside my cabin and while it's obvious that Jan's never flyfished, I notice that David is a decent caster. "My father and brother fished," he tells me, and stops casting for a minute—the rain running off his big, floppy hat. "Oregon" he says. "Rainbows mostly."

The creek is swollen and the rain is still falling. I'd like to start farther upstream, but it's clear that

PETE NIESON

THE KENAI RIVER FLOWS MORE THAN 80 MILES FROM KENAI LAKE TO COOK INLET, NEAR SOLDOTNA.

THERE IS NOTHING QUITE LIKE A WOODSTOVE WHEN COMING IN FROM A COLD, HEAVY RAIN.

NICK PRICE

Jan and David aren't up for that spongy walk. So my son brings David to a nearby run and I stay with Jan, finding her a slot between a pair of dead spruces for a short backcast. Conditions are terrible. In addition to the driving rain, the wind has picked up, gusting at us from the east, with the old man's beard on the spruces now blowing sideways. I know there are fish here but with the mergansers and the wind and Jan's enthusiastic but faithless casting, I begin to wonder. Then it happens. A grayling arcs from the water and seems to hang there for a moment before slicing back into the river with her fly, hooking itself on the way down. Jan marvels at the fish before realizing that she's attached to it. I throw my hand up sharply to show her how to strike and she mimics it well enough that we soon have a good fish in the net. She calls out to David over the wind and the rain, telling him that she has caught a fish, as if she can't quite believe it—like it was the most unexpected thing that could have happened.

David gives her a huge thumbs up and begins casting too, working his way slowly up the creek beside my son. We fish for another two hours with the thought of that fat grayling still in our minds, but David and Jan are wet and moving slower now, obviously cold, although their eyes are still bright. So my son sets out ahead of us for the cabin, to start a fire, put on a pot of coffee, and a kettle for tea. By the time we get back he's wiped the condensation off the picture window, giving us all a good look at the raindrops hitting the lake.

There is nothing quite like coming in from the cold. We sit by the stove and hold our coffee and tea, eating cookies and ignoring the time, warmer now, with the simple taste of shortbread on our lips. We talk, and learn that David and Jan had recently been to Sweden, and that they love the Big Island. He tells us again that he hasn't been on a stream in years, but he thinks about the trips he and his father and brother would take to Oregon. He says that's why he's here today—to fish and

> HE PRAYS OVER THE STREAM AND TO THE MOUNTAINS BEYOND, UTTERLY SINCERE IN HIS FAITH IN THE BEAUTY OF THIS WORLD AND THE PROMISE OF THE NEXT.

think about his brother and father and those trips. The rain falls hard on the metal roof as we pour the last of the coffee, looking out on the lake and wondering what the afternoon might bring.

David had said that he wanted to do some walking and Jan hadn't, so she stayed not far from the trailhead with my son, who'd carried her a folding chair and an umbrella. He stationed her on a wide bend in the creek where they could watch for rising fish, take in the monkshood and delphinium in bloom, or listen to woodpeckers working the spruces for beetles. David and I followed the top of a steep ridge where the walking was easier. The rain had slowed, but the ceiling was still low; Denali—sometimes visible from where we stood—was still lost in the clouds.

In the distance I could see a single rising fish. I showed David the swirl and told him that it would be a steep climb down to where I'd seen it. He was thrilled at the prospect and soon we were sliding down the ridge, David only falling backwards once.

The fish was a small grayling, rising steadily despite the weather, and after adding some floatant and making a few false casts, David dropped the little yellow stimulator above the fish and soon had it hooked. He stripped it in slowly—rod bent—and I netted it. David studied it hard before releasing it back to the tannin-stained creek. Another fish began to rise downstream and David soon caught that one, too. After slipping it back into the current, he stood and reeled in, making it clear that David Peterson had done all the fishing he needed to do. Which was good, because we saw no other risers that day, only rain and clouds and dead spruces and a swollen creek.

Back at the trailhead, David takes my son and me by the shoulders and asks if he can pray with us. I am immediately uncomfortable, but before we can answer he's wrapped us in his arms and begins to pray. "Bless these men," he says to the valley. "Bless these men who bring us into such beautiful country." He is praying now as if this world will never catch fire; praying as if there is not a forest of dead spruces around him; praying as if he can see beyond these trees and through the clouds, as if what he sees is green and goes on forever. He prays over the stream and to the mountains beyond, utterly sincere in his faith in the beauty of this world and the promise of the next. And even though in this burning world I am often filled only with doubt, as I stand here with this man who does not fish, watching this river and the lupines tall and purple on the banks, I see—at least in this moment—some of what he sees: that there will be no fires today, only the steady gift of rain.

WHILE GRAYLING MIGHT NOT BE THE MOST-TARGETED SPECIES IN ALASKA, THEY REMAIN AN IMPORTANT GAME FISH THAT CAN SOMETIMES BE A DAY-SAVER.

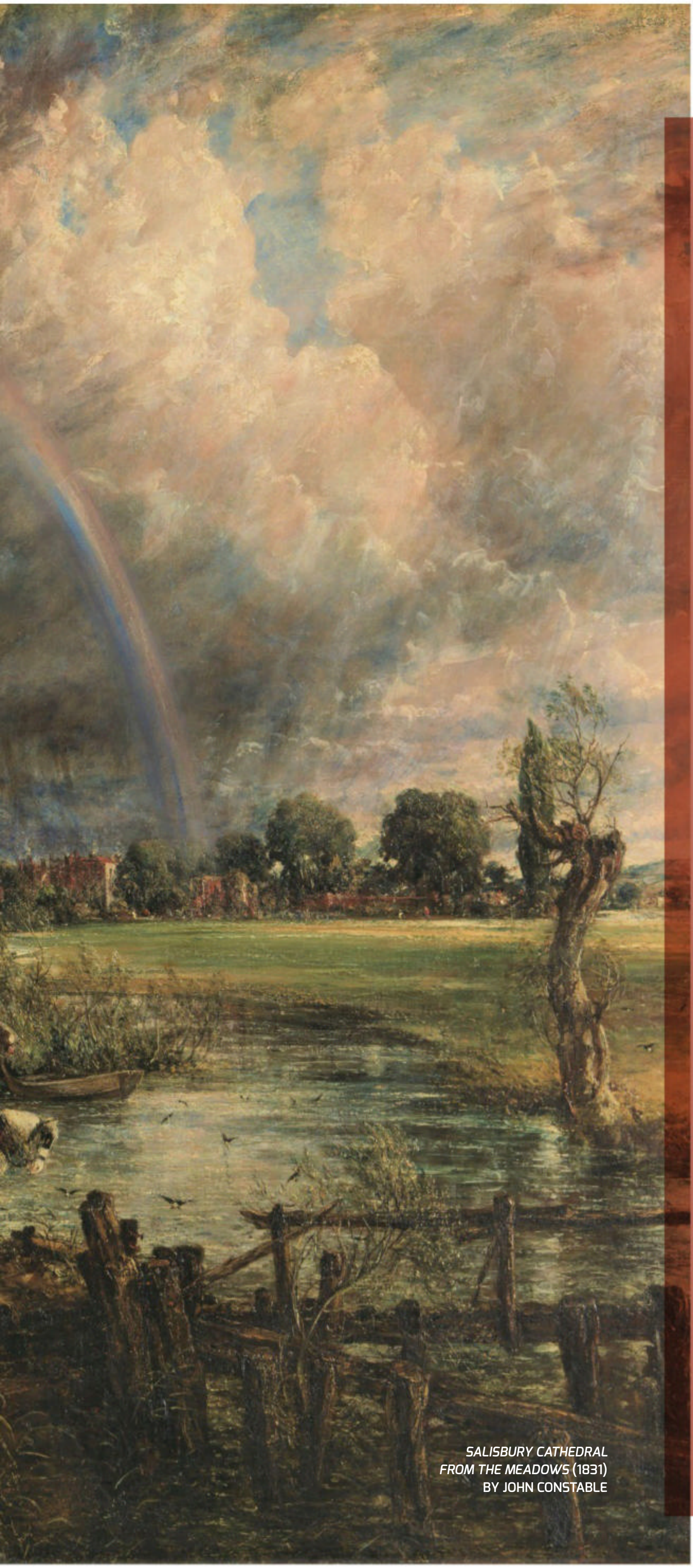
DAN ARMSTRONG

ANGLING WITH VAN GOGH

Painters and poachers in England

BY PARKER BAUER

PUBLIC DOMAIN



SALISBURY CATHEDRAL FROM THE MEADOWS (1831) BY JOHN CONSTABLE

Who wouldn't like to wet a line in Salisbury Cathedral? After all, standing beneath its vaulted ceiling, watched over by stained-glass angels and saints, while working a fly through its secret waters, could be the peak experience of angling in England.

Go for it. The thirteenth-century structure, a fluent example of English Gothic, was famously painted by John Constable in *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (1831). The artist depicted it in the distance, with its spire, England's tallest, thrust up like a defiant finger to a stormy sky. A wagon and team of horses ford a foreground river, a tidy biblical rainbow topping it all off. Aside from the nags and the hit-or-miss atmospherics, the same view is still available today. You pause on a footpath in the watery meadows, the vista uncluttered, and there stands the spired old basilica, with the Avon River rippling past—rumored to be a decent trout stream in its upper reaches.

The path bridges the river and bisects the willowy Queen Elizabeth Gardens, then loops around to the cathedral, which you enter with fly rod in hand, or at least the tip section with a reel taped to it, tenkara-style. Nobody stops you; anglers having a long history in the faith. You make your way up the central aisle, imagining yourself in a tabletop model of heaven, and stop at the transept. If you're lucky, a docent with a long wooden stick may be hooking the iron ring on a small panel and pulling it out of the stone floor. Someone in the knot of visitors around you gasps when the docent then lowers the stick into the hole and brings it back out dripping wet. Just below the cathedral's foundation, the visitors discover, lies a bed of gravel and the flowing River Avon itself. It is now up to you to win the docent's indulgence (the trick is to pose as a harmless nut, for which the fly rod is an ideal prop) so that you can lower your nymph through the hole—like ice-fishing—and then jig it back as sultrily as you can.

It's unlikely you'll catch a trout. The point is that, in the underground waters of this place, loaded with old art, encrusted with tombs and crypts and effigies galore, you are plying your fly into the depths of England's unconscious. This sets the genuine tone for your trip, for in many ways, technical and otherwise, this is what trout fishing in England is like: poking around in tight bits of water, in a series of painterly settings, for not a hell of a lot of fish.

A breezy autumn morning, it is caddis time, though the air's filled only with flying leaves. On a grassy lane you roll down along a hedgerow to the River Windrush, not so much a river here as a reticent little brook on its way to the Thames. It sneaks through a gnarly bottom, meadow on one side, woods on the other.

At the suggestion of your guide you start with a straw-colored caddis, size 16. The guide, Mark, is a man of formidable good sense, a former editor of physics journals. The water's barely a rod length across, between lush walls of bulrush. Tuck your casts into the calf-deep riffles, says Mark, and into the tails of froggy little pools. No fault can be found in this advice besides it being a bitch to follow. Half the time your fly pings a bush or a limb on the backcast. But the casts are short, the currents uncomplicated. Mostly, you manage. Now and then a fish rises. But not to your fly.

CONFRONTED BY A LANDLORD OR WATER BAILIFF, HE TURNED ON HIS BEST YANKEE TWANG AND PLEADED IGNORANCE OF LOCAL RULES ON TROUT WATERS.

In truth, the spot feels a bit off. Standing in the weeds, surrounded by forest. A lot like (speaking of paintings) *Forest, with a Large Sunny Oak and Fisherman at a Pond*, by the French artist Narcisse Virgilio Díaz de la Peña. A figure prowls far off in a sunlit glade, but there's barely a sliver of pond. Without the title, you wouldn't guess the person is fishing at all. Perhaps it's a poacher.

At one weed-walled pool too deep to wade, you clamber up the bank and crawl out through a clump of stinging nettles. In the scramble you blow out both wading boots, the soles tearing off entirely. They're not your boots, actually, but a pair borrowed from your host, who won them with a pile of other gear in an online auction. Your host, an old American pal who owns a cottage here, ponders your wet feet and offers, "You get what you pay for." Your own boots are lost with your rods and the rest of your luggage, and won't show up for another four days.

Meanwhile, you're fishing with an outfit patched together from the mass of auction bounty laid out on a bed in the cottage. Two dozen rods, as many reels and more, spooled with lines of unknown weight and taper. "Your guess is as good as mine," your pal tells you, setting aside the most club-like of the cane sticks and leaving you with the lighter, niftier graphites—more appropriate for the fun-sized waters you'll be fishing.

The stream wanders off in the woods and you walk the bank, soleless, casing the water. A stealth approach, so you're almost on top of two roe deer—a doe and fawn—when they bound away like whitetails. Farther on, a kingfisher darts past, with the form of our belted kingfisher but colored like a scarlet macaw. This stretch of the Windrush, with its abundant wildlife, flows through the Sherborne Estate, which, when overtaken by the UK's hearty taxation, was acquired by the National Trust, a conservancy whose holdings are open to the public. Not that the Windrush here is public water; it's leased to the flyfishing club to which your host mystically gained membership, and from which he's yet to be ejected.

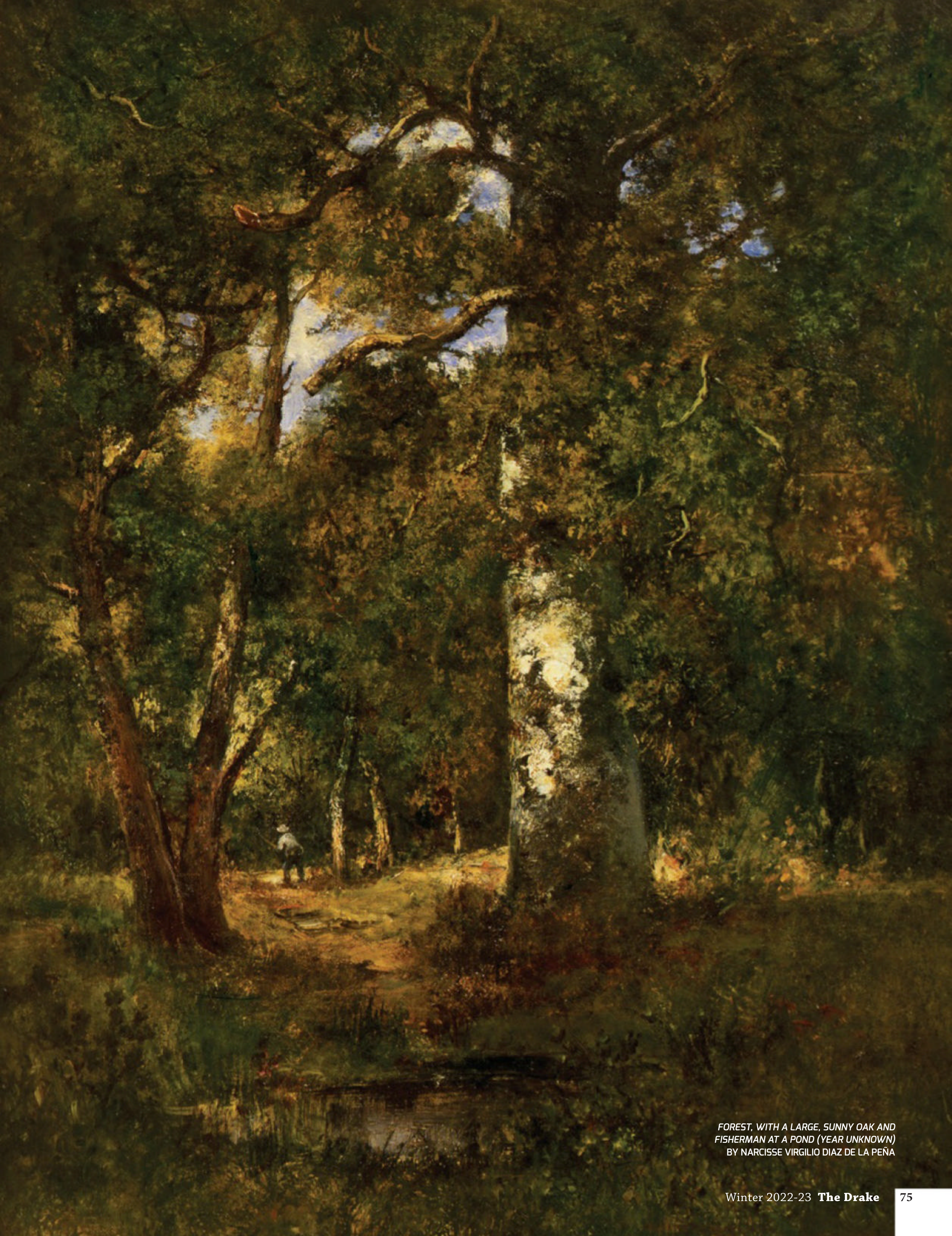
You drop down the bank and wade, in case an artist should come by wishing to paint *Woodsy Stream with Tangled Angler*. Your fly on the cast finds all obstructions and wraps the leader on them in neat nylon tendrils. Two snagless casts and you feel you've got a rhythm going. Then you're hung up again. Nature, you feel, is not your friend.

Down the left lane you hurtle, your pal at the wheel of his Jaguar, stone walls and hedgerows skimming by just inches away. Everything is so snug here, tugged in as if by a drawstring. You fiddle with the radio and find a replay of "Rule, Britannia!" from Last Night of the Proms (a classical-music concert series held annually in London), a rouser on a muggy afternoon. A heatwave is sweeping the isle, which hasn't helped the fishing. At least you have your tackle back, the 4- and 5-weights and your tatty American flies, driven up from London courtesy of Mr. Branson's Virgin Atlantic.

You come into open country, and there in the distance loom the tombs of Stonehenge, a crowd around them, people in odd frozen postures, a juggler in self-absorption. The scene seems no advance on the beer-bust Stonehenge picnics that Henry James wrote about back in 1872, not hiding his distaste. You bump down a hummocky track and through a gate, after fiddling with and finally opening the rusted combo lock big enough to secure a castle.

Still on the club waters, but no guide this time. For your pal it's a kind of comedown. In his salad days, he bummed around the realm and stopped to fish wherever the water looked inviting. Confronted by a landlord or water-bailiff, he turned on his best Yankee twang and pleaded ignorance of local rules on trout waters. Conning the constabulary was half the fun. A time or two, he got not an eviction but a hint that the next

PUBLIC DOMAIN



FOREST, WITH A LARGE, SUNNY OAK AND FISHERMAN AT A POND (YEAR UNKNOWN)
BY NARCISSE VIRGILIO DIAZ DE LA PEÑA

pool upstream might be more gratifying than the one he was thrashing at the moment.

So you're given your guest pass and a look at the rulebook. Are you allowed to piss in the bushes? Probably not, but you don't read the fine print far enough to find out. You walk to the River Coln, a wispy headwater already in evening shade, though the sun casts a ruddy glow on the meadows. A collection of old oaks has shed a load of limbs in the somber pools. No hatch in view.

You tie on a Comparadun and elicit a couple of limp rises, both of which you miss. An irretrievable hour goes by. This club snoozer leaves a bit to be desired. The fact is, your friend lured you across the Atlantic on the premise of poaching. For the real fishing, he wrote, you still needed to poach. The two of you would sneak onto riverine estates with ghostly old country houses, and hurl your flies at the pampered lunkers. As these are the fish that inhabit those feudal waters. No fish would be kept, and no one would be the wiser. Poaching, he noted, is not without pedigree. Shakespeare is alleged to have been a poacher—of game, not fish, but game is ruled out since it's more likely to get you shot. Or landed in jail, which might be worse.

FROM A PAIR OF FRAMED PANELS, THE TEN COMMANDMENTS GLINTS DOWN, AS IF FROM SINAI. *THOU SHALL NOT POACH* IS NOT AMONG THEM.

Meanwhile, on the Coln, you've waded yourself into a predicament. The banks close in on you and the water's up almost to your armpits, the bottom so soft any attempt to turn around would suck you under. Your pal is a hundred yards upstream or half a mile down, who knows? He's sometimes serious, sometimes not. It does seem true, as he boasts, that recently he was bounced from the village social club after running afoul of a fixture there known as Robust Betty. Freely discussing transatlantic politics was the formal offense, though you suspect his rakish past as a poacher may have come to light. In either case, you don't doubt he merited the boot.

You push on, wedging through a funnel of flora until finding a scalable slope on the left bank. You slither up and out and onto the wrong bank, because the club has no rights on that side. On your knees you peer through the weeds, not feeling nearly as feral as Rousseau's tiger in *The Dream* (1910), with its Edenic nude on a couch. You rise up, still on your knees, and temptation rules. Ahead lies a little piece of a run, overgrown, that really can be fished only from this side. With luck you could get a drift or two before hanging up. You scrap the dry and knot on a Pheasant Tail, then fling out a cast from the forbidden bank.

Dusk fallen, you go strictly by feel and set the hook in a fish that darts quickly below you in the run, down there out of sight in the slot. A bit too big to be lifted on the tippet, so you slide down the weedy bank and get hold of the fly. A passable brown, no parr marks at least. The bruised weeds free a sweet cool fragrance that fuses with the fish's own as you send it off—a poacher at last.

Truly it's not as tough as all that. Not always. On a spring trip a few years ago, you had good fishing on the River Test even with the water high and off-color, your best trout a three-pounder. Now, though, a heatwave and hardly any hatches.

No matter. The River Windrush redeems the day with its name alone. Think breezes and blowing duns and trout busting out all over. You pass through the medieval market-town of Burford with its tea rooms and flower-boxed pubs, posed by the Windrush as if for its portrait. The novelist Compton Mackenzie, who lived here before the First World War in a house on the river, depicted the town in one of his lesser books, whose writer-hero, looking about the locale for the first time, exclaims, "By gad, if I can't write here, I ought to be shot." Okay, *kapow*.

Luckily, one poor book can't overwrite the beauty of the place, which carries over from town to country, or maybe the other way around. In any case, the sheep meadows and old stone barns, the hedgerows full of pheasants, the buried power lines and lack of poles, all preserve a time missing in our American midlands today. Just out of town you pull up at a bridge—club access—and gaze sagely at the water below, as if you knew enough in your spleen or wherever to gauge the prospects. The Windrush, here an actual small, waist-high river, flashes through woods with an undergrowth of damp-loving plants. You drop on down.

The first pool's a diagram, like those drawings in trout books showing every conceivable type of cover and pitfall: crosscurrents and cutbanks and minefields of rocks, overlaid with arrows calling out the innumerable dueling flows, plus dark, outhouse-moon crescents of trout seen from the top down in their aesthetic lies.

You look it over and wade in with a plan. From the riffle below, you work a size 16 Royal Wulff on the slick over a bar of cobbles at the tail. Then, wading up the left edge amid rooted aquatics, you cast along a current break, finally slicing a shot under a row of

THE DREAM (1910)
BY HENRI ROUSSEAU

PUBLIC DOMAIN

bushes that shades the chute pouring into the pool. Back at the tail you switch to a nymph, a weighted Hare's Ear, and drift it under a fresh-fallen tree, playing with fire and at last breaking it off.

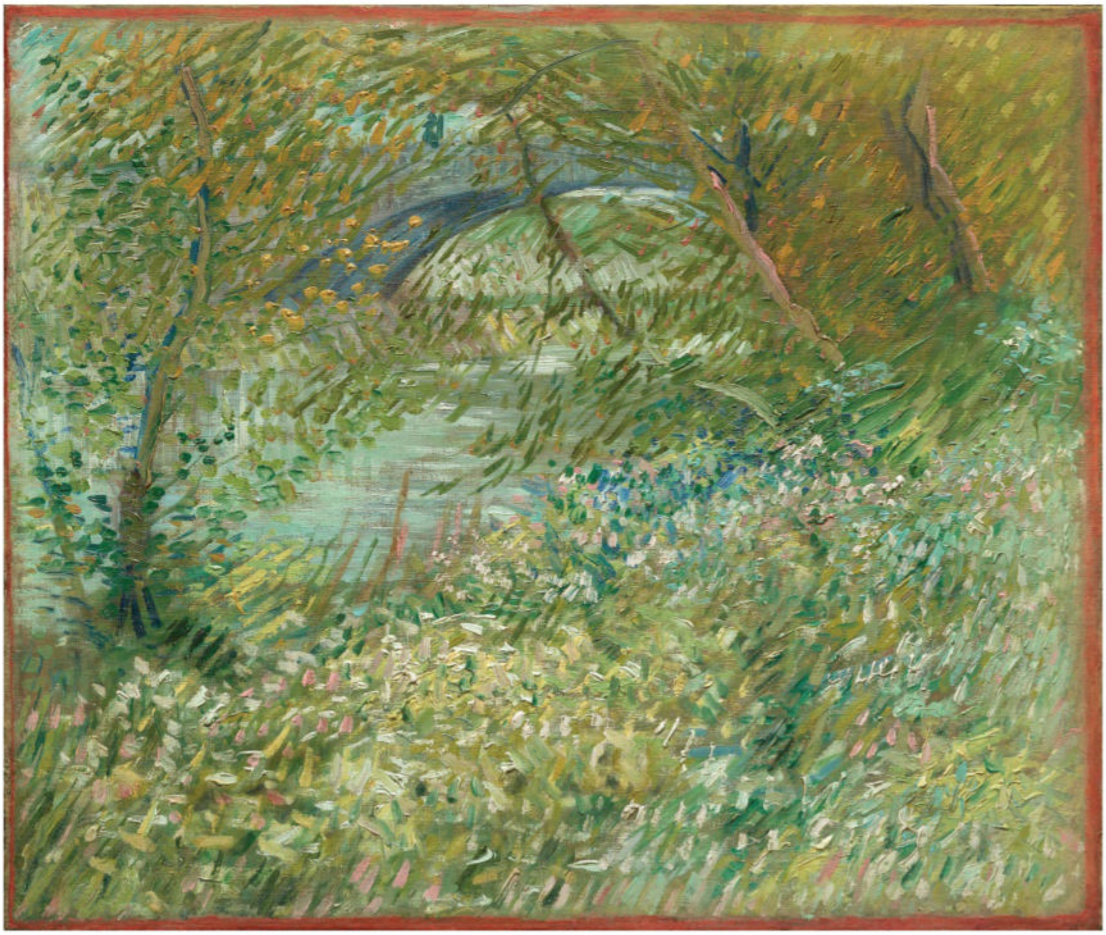
Having not too clumsily traced over all the pool's intricacies, you could move on. Or not. You could forget the finesse and fire a long cast straight up the open roiling middle of the pool, as bawdily as pitching pork rinds for bass. Flip open the box, then, and seize the pattern that first offers itself, a big marabou bluffer of a streamer that works fine for fall browns in Montana. Surely, no trout has ever seen it here, so what the hell. Tie it on, soak it a couple minutes, you're set.

Cast made, the big fly billows on back to you in the depths. You strip line and come snug, and in time a foot-long brown boils up. By sunset, a couple more fish. Grateful for small things, you head back to the bridge. From there, at the behest of your host, you take the walk up a grassy slope to a modest stone building standing alone in slanted light, a mute bell on top.

St. Oswald's Church, says a placard, dates to A.D. 1100 or perhaps 1250. The heavy wood door is unlocked. Inside, it feels like a small barn or stable, which it was, for a time in its history when religion ebbed. Timbered ceiling, box pews, gothic windows in which someone has left a vase of fresh flowers, white and pink. On a plaster wall, an ancient painting, flaking away, portrays St. Martin of Tours giving his cloak to a beggar. From a pair of framed panels The Ten Commandments glints down, as if from Sinai. *Thou shalt not poach* is not among them. Though surely it's implied in *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, or his ox or ass.* Outside the door you spot a tombstone with a carved stag, perhaps the grave of a hunter. You start back then to the bridge, feeling an onset of repentance, and flush a pheasant that roars away in the dusk.

Long ago, maybe in the day when Chaucer's Wife of Bath was on her libidinous way to Canterbury, the Sherborne Brook was reshaped into a ditch. Its loops were lopped off, leaving a sluice, part of the happy progress of English agriculture. It cuts across the water meadows quick as a zipper, weedy, a few inches deep. Parts of it serve as a spawning and nursery area, contributing a trickle of wild browns to the stocks of hatchery fish in the Windrush, of which it's a feeder.

A windy afternoon on the Sherborne, cloud shadows racing by, and Mark the guide is with you again. He's upstream on the brook with your host, actually, and you start in alone, easing down into a fissure between now-familiar walls of bulrush. With a parachute Adams you try a roll cast, on account of



RIVER BANK IN SPRINGTIME (1887)
BY VINCENT VAN GOGH

PUBLIC DOMAIN (2)

the wind, but instantly the line washes back on the current in a wad, which won't work to repeat the roll. You flick out a couple of overhead casts, twenty feet, sharp gusts on the backcast wanting to deflect the fly sideways to the flogging weed tops.

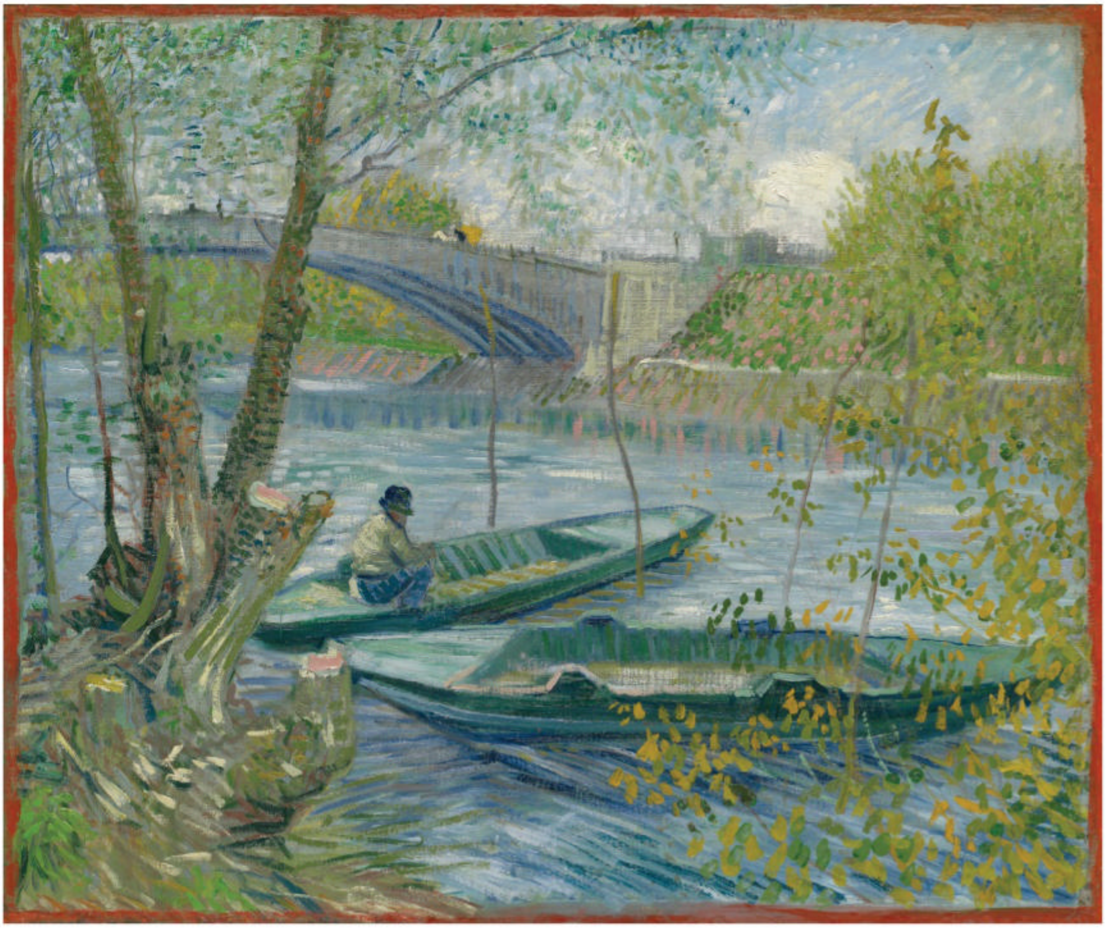
Your rod's an eight-footer, but when trying to stay beneath the wind it feels like the mainmast of the *Flying Dutchman*. You wish you had your creaky old six-foot Fenwick. A crouch doesn't help much and finally you drop to one knee. Inching along, you get at last into a cadence, skillfully delivering each cast, feeling good about the conjunction of world and self, until you hang the whole works in a hawthorn bush. New fly and tippet. The taper shortens. Fine. You'd rather do a half-assed job of fishing than shear a sheep.

A word here about hawthorn. A shrub or small tree, hawthorn has the densest foliage known to botany—or to angling botany—a monstrous ball of compacted leaves and bloodthirsty thorns. The banks of the Sherborne Brook teem with hawthorns, rarely beyond reach of your fly, and once they've glommed onto it they won't let go. "A fly goes into a hawthorn," Mark says, "it's not coming out."

Chalk it up to the charm of the place, a part of the whole. Hawthorns, after all, bear lipsticked little berries, seedy but technically edible, a bear's lunch if there were any bears. The other day in Kensington, you stopped in a florist's shop whose blossoms and scents along a slender aisle shut out the stink and din of the street, and so it is here. Whatever dogs your days won't bother you on this brook. It's witchproof.

The great Vincent Van Gogh spent time in England, 1873-76, all of it as an art dealer in London. If he got out in the sticks, it couldn't have been much. Yet his rustic masterwork *River Bank in Springtime* (1887) might almost have been painted right here on this English brook, on this spot, on a day in early fall. A throw rug of wildflowers, pink and blue, a flow of willow, a trace of brook below a breaking wave of silver-green grass, a half-hidden footbridge—probably the picture needs more than a few phrases to describe it, but better to stop there. Its model is not a rivulet but, as the title says, a river. The Seine, in Paris, is made to look minimal, the frame showing only a slice of it, while the footbridge is the *Pont de Clichy,* seen without its busy carriage traffic. The alchemy is evident by comparison with *Fishing in Spring, the Pont de Clichy*, which Van Gogh may have done on the same day, a bigger scene with a pair of boats by the bank—nice enough, but an apprentice could have pulled it off.

The point? Just that this visionary who strove so hard to perfect the world by way of art, and so despaired of success that he cut off an ear, came



FISHING IN SPRING, THE PONT DE CLICHY (1887) BY VINCENT VAN GOGH

uncannily close to evoking on canvas the delight of being in such a haven, deep in the weeds. Fortified by this fresh view, as applied to casting obstacles and obstinate trout, you fish on, not giddy, quite, but newly glad of the day— its palette and scent, pattern and surprise. Nudge your outlook and you're no longer fighting the wind but playing it, a kid again, feeding out kite string on a spring day.

Your host and guide return, in tandem, wanting to see if you're having any fun. This they equate with catching something, so you're led off to a sort of Zen pool with a floral island, missing only a fleet of drowsy goldfish. Alongside the island there's a rise, then another. About to cast, you note behind you, and a bit to your right, a hawthorn with arms held wide. You're down in the usual gash, so you make a short cast with the line directly above your head. A decent drift, the fish passes up the Adams, so you repeat. On the fourth drift comes the take, or near-take, and though you don't lift too soon, the fly pops up and sticks in your earlobe, a tale too banal to tell but there it is. The hook is barbless, so it won't be necessary, this time, to snip off the ear.

It strikes you, sitting in Cheltenham over fish and chips, that the painter and poacher have much in common. For purity of motive the painter may win out, mostly, but the poacher who keeps no fish is perhaps not a villain. What the two of them share is ownership, not the sort granted by deed, but something deeper. Acute observation is key—of flora, fauna, landforms, weather, migration, light. No one has a keener eye than the painter, except the person standing where they know they aren't allowed.

Still, the poacher—that's you—is the guilty party. Not that you were any good at it, but you lusted after poaching, a lot. In a court of appeals your plea might go like this: Guilty, your honor, but everyone who fishes is a poacher. In the long view, the lands and waters aren't ours. We're all just passing through, tripping the motion detectors, leaving our campsite crappier than we found it. Consult the twenty-fourth psalm to find the true owner.

Such questions are vexing, especially in England, where beguiling landscapes are so abundant but public-fishing water—trout water anyway—is so scarce. Maybe it's too much to think about, all the metaphysics of ethics and property and who's nabbing whose trout. Your last night in England, you fall into a dream, a full-blown fantasy, a tryst beside the Sherborne Brook with Kate, the Duchess of Cambridge. There is not even a moment of fishing in it, not that you mind. God save Kate.

THE PAPER HANGER

Meet Richard Chiappone. With shout-outs to Jim Babb, catch-and-release clamming, and exotic dancers.

BY DAVE ZOBY

RICHARD CHIAPPONE ON
ALASKA'S ANCHOR RIVER.

Years ago, upon my first publication in *Gray's Sporting Journal*, editor Jim Babb suggested I look up a friend of his in Anchor Point, Alaska. I was just starting out, and Jim thought my writing to be "windy." He thought I could learn a thing or two from a seasoned writer who fixated about the same things I did, like working-class values and fishing trips that didn't turn out quite right. He told me that Rich Chiappone lived in Anchor Point, and was a fabulous chef with Italian leanings. I had read Rich's essays and short stories for years in *Gray's* and elsewhere. His piece, "The Liar's Code," remains one of my favorite fishing essays. But I wasn't about to bum-rush a guy on a trout stream who I didn't even know, so I did the gentlemanly thing and signed up for a course on writing dialogue that Rich was teaching in Homer as part of the Kachemak Bay Writers' Conference.

A two-time recipient of the Robert Traver Award, Rich has been publishing in fishing magazines for thirty years. You may know his stories and essays from places such as *The Sun* magazine*, Gray's, Midcurrent, Sporting Classics,* even here in *The Drake*. He is one of those rare flyfishing writers who tells it like it is—has always told it like it is--even when the truth hurts. And unlike so many writers, Rich came to the craft late in life. A wallpaper guy by trade, he entered the University of Alaska when he was in his forties. Then he was accepted to the MFA program where the visiting professor, Tobias Wolff, took note of Rich's ability and drive. Wolff encouraged Rich to send his work to national publications like *Playboy, The New Yorker,* and others. Wolff helped him land an agent. Before long, Rich began teaching creative writing classes at the university.

All of this might have seemed like a dream to a guy from Niagara Falls, N.Y., who had only come to Alaska to work for his brother and fish for salmon. For decades, Rich made his living at worksites and doing remodels. Between jobs, he flyfished. Even now, if the conversation turns too academic, too highbrow, Rich will remind you that he hails from the construction profession, and that art came into his life rather recently.

Incognito, I showed up in Homer and attended Rich's course. I immediately noticed that he had deep rapport with his students—some of them had been taking his workshops for years, returning annually to the campus in Homer to enroll. Spend any time with Rich and you'll notice that he values the teacher/student relationship more than anything. He can recall students' names from years past and can recite their stories from fifteen years ago. He taught a hilarious class, and I could see why Babb sent me to Homer. I introduced myself, but in the busy scrum of a full-blown writers' conference, famous and not-so-famous writers coming and going, I didn't really get to *meet* Rich. So I came back the next year and enrolled in his course on using humor in short stories. I was living in the bed of my truck with my black Lab, Rocket. Dodging the local cops and living off day-old pastries (sold for half-price), I was trying to learn how to write, and maybe catch a few salmon in the process. As far as humor went, I could learn a lot from Rich.

This time he remembered me. He invited me to fish. We managed a few scrawny dollies out of the Anchor River, the river where his most thoughtful work seems to emerge. We ate pizza at Fat Olives and talked about Ray Carver and Chekhov. We began to send each other drafts of the stories about which we were obsessing. Often, his descriptions of fishing became invites to his house. Not being the type to take these invitations rhetorically, I showed up. He once served me and my friend, Bill Mixer, a generous plate of Chinook carpaccio, the thought of which still makes my mouth water.

EVEN NOW, IF THE CONVERSATION TURNS TOO ACADEMIC, TOO HIGHBROW, RICH WILL REMIND YOU THAT HE HAILS FROM THE CONSTRUCTION TRADE, AND THAT ART CAME INTO HIS LIFE RATHER RECENTLY.

This summer I caught up with Rich as he was scrubbing the bloody decks of his buddy's boat in the Homer Harbor. They'd been out to East Chugach Island hunting for lingcod.

"We killed like six of these things," Rich said. "Enormous fish. Prehistoric. It's wild out there. We anchored in Picnic Cove so we were the first boat to get to the spot. We caught big halibut, too. You can come over this weekend and have some if you want."

Known for his homemade bread and his Italian-inspired seafood dishes, Rich lives with his wife, Lin, in a house they've remodeled themselves. The bookshelves are packed with authors I recognize, and their walls are adorned with original art. Some of the watercolors, like the three-panel one hanging in his living room, are his. The one that always catches my eye depicts a silvery king swimming among sockeyes. I recognize this piece because it is also the cover for *Opening Days*, one of Rich's three books of prose.

The Hunger of Crows, a mystery novel set in Alaska, was published in November of 2021. This interview took place on the Sterling Highway between Homer and Ninilchik. The Anchor was closed to fishing because the salmon returns were so low, so we were

DAVE ZOBY

fishing the Ninilchik for kings with our nine-weights. But the run there was also weak, and most of the returning kings were already upriver. I talked to Rich about his life of writing, the future of fishing stories, and how he approaches teaching.

What can you tell me about *The Hunger of Crows?* Does it have much fishing?
No, not really. Does the guy fish?—I guess he does. There's maybe one page of fishing somewhere in there. The general plot is that there's a woman, Carla, thirty-nine years old, who is freaking out about turning forty. So she tries to stay young by hooking up with men. She has reckless one-night stands. And that's going to make her stay young. She's working as a waitress in a bar, and she's picking up men—but she picks up a dangerous guy. She doesn't know it at the time. While she's at his house, she finds something.

> "I THINK I'VE ALREADY PROVEN THAT I CAN WRITE BOOKS THAT NOBODY WILL BUY. IT'S TIME TO BE A GROWNUP AND WRITE NOVELS—THAT'S THE ATTITUDE WRITERS HAVE ABOUT NOVELS."

A severed human head?
No, it's a photograph. She finds a photograph of this guy and he's in a military uniform and he's got an automatic weapon. He's standing guard over a table of three men. It turns out that the man who she had this one-nighter with is like a gunslinger for the CIA who was stealing tens of millions of dollars from the DEA back in the '90s in Columbia.

And she takes the photo—she doesn't know what it is—she just thinks it's an old Army photo. But she has a collection of things she takes from men. Whenever she has sex with a guy, she'll take some small item from him unbeknownst to him. So she takes this picture.

And she goes home with this photo and she realizes that one of the men at the table is this famous guy who is a billionaire military contractor. And so Carla kind of freaks out and jumps in her truck—she's got a truck with a cab-over camper—drives out of Phoenix and keeps driving north until she runs out of road in Homer, Alaska. So she's hiding in Homer.

Do you know enough about women to write in a woman's voice?
I know enough about *people*. What would a *person* do? I never ask myself "what would a woman do?" When I'm writing, I'm saying, "what would a person do?"

CHIAPPONE IS KNOWN FOR HIS CULINARY PURSUITS. HERE, HE PREPARES CHIOPINNO WITH SCALLOPS, SPOT PRAWNS, AND WHITE KING SALMON.

Well, I'm just hoping they're different than us.
I hope so, too.

After thirty years of writing short stories and essays, why did you decide to change course and write a novel?
I think I've already proven that I can write books that nobody will buy. It's time to be a grownup and write novels—that's the attitude writers have about novels. E. L. Doctorow says that writing a novel is like driving one hundred miles in the dark. He says all you have to see is one hundred feet in front of you, whatever the headlights show you. You don't have to see the rest of the way, you know?

Do you think living in Homer, with these dark winters, has helped or hurt you as a writer? Maybe if you lived in New York you would have fished a lot less but published a lot more.
Oh, no. I had every opportunity. I mean, I had the best agent in the world looking out for me. I had a great writer telling me he liked my work. I had the same opportunities here that I would've had in New York. I just blew it. I quit writing, basically.

Was the fishing writing emerging at this time?
Not really. I'd written "The Chubs"— about a guy fishing for chubs. Wolff loved it, and (literary agent) Amanda Urban loved it. So all of these people who mattered loved this story. They sent it out everywhere and I got all of these glowing rejections from *The New Yorker, Harpers,* and *The Paris Review*. Colin Harrison, the fiction editor from *Harpers*, said I equivocated. He said the ending wasn't right. So I fixed it. This is before faxes—I didn't even fax it—I had to put it in an overnight express envelope. And he called me and said, *Okay this is good, you nailed it. I'm taking it into a meeting and I'm going to push for publication.* I never heard from him again (laughter).

Do you think he died?
Maybe he got hit by an asteroid. I don't know. So about four years go by and "The Chubs" is just sitting in this drawer. And I'm depressed and rejected. And another thing happened that I'm not being honest about. In 1996, the Marriott hotel came to Anchorage. Remember, I'm a wallpaper hanger. I'm doing people's kitchens and bathrooms. Some jobs pay like maybe five hundred bucks. The Marriott comes in and the general contractor calls me and says, *Hey, we want you to do this hotel.* The whole fucking hotel? I mean, that's a $100,000 job. I'm a guy with a pick-up and two step ladders.

DAVE ZOBY

Plus you have a MFA in creative writing. Don't forget that.
Right. You can see why I never went the tenure-track professor route. I wasn't taking adjunct pay to teach punctuation to hockey players when I could make two grand a week hanging wallpaper. So I just put the writing aside for five years. But by then all of my publishing connections in New York—

Wait—so what happened to "The Chubs?"
Okay. So around the late '90s I was talking to the writer Pete Fromm. And he says there's a new editor at *Gray's* named Jim Babb. He tells me I should send "The Chubs" to him. It had been rejected at all of the big magazines. And Jim said yeah, we'll run it. But my career as a bigtime writer was over at that point.

Can you make fishing destination pieces any good, you know, on a literary level?
No, not really. Maybe. You can make them funny, or ironic. You can make them memorable in that respect. For example, I wrote one about Christmas Island. It was called "Trevally Ripped Our Flesh." I guess tone is everything. The ones that I really deplore—that have given fishing writing a bad name—are the self-congratulatory ones. They aren't congratulatory about catching fish. They are stories that are almost like *don't you wish you were me*? You know that attitude? Boy, do I hate that.

Unfortunately, I think some of the editors, for quite a while, thought that was what people wanted.
I think there's a shift now—and maybe there has been for awhile. I give a lot of credit to Jim Babb for that. Editors back then were more inclined toward tales like *me and Frank went hunting and shot a lot of grouse*. Babb leaned in toward stories in which nobody gets anything. Self-deprecation, I think, goes a long way.

Are you querying a lot now?
Not really. I used to write some very personal nonfiction, about my daughter dying.

CHIAPPONE, TYING UP A GT FLY ON AITUTAKI, ONE OF THE COOK ISLANDS IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC.

WILL RICE (THE ALASKAN ONE)

I remember. Weren't you mixing the death of your daughter in with other writing? Like the one about the clam. You can't kill it so you take it back down to the shore…
Yes. Catch-and-release clamming. I couldn't kill it.

Were you blending too much together?
Yeah. But it was also too soon. I was struggling with death, with killing things. That's the first line of that essay, "The Killing Season," and I wrote it after Lori died in 2004. I wrote about it right away, which is dumb. I thought, *this is the greatest thing anyone has ever written*. Pouring my heart out. So I sent it to my agent. He called me from New York and said, "Rich, you know I like you. And you know I like your writing, but this is a mess." I thought he was calling to tell me the Pulitzer committee wanted it.

I've done that before. Jumped the gun.
Yeah, so I let it sit for years. And then I took it out and rewrote it. I got much more control over it. You know, Carver has a great essay called, "On Writing," and he says: *If the words are blurred by the writer's unbridled emotions, the reader's eyes will glaze right over them and nothing will be accomplished*.

But you have to get that first draft down—
Yeah, but you gotta *know* it's a shitty first draft.

I don't know that. But I'm gonna know it pretty soon… So, was landing a piece in *Playboy* your next thing?
Yes. A short story.

Are they still doing that? Publishing fiction, I mean?
I have no idea. I haven't seen a *Playboy* in at least a couple decades.

How did you land that story in such a big publication? How did that story come about?
It was titled "Dealer's Choice." I was working out in Chignik Bay, which is on the other side of Cook Inlet, on the Alaska Peninsula. And I got into a

poker game one night with some guys on the job. And there was a woman from the cannery who came—an attractive woman. And as she was playing cards with us she starts telling us these stories about when she was an exotic dancer. She gets everybody so flustered that we all lose our money to her because she's telling these sexually charged stories.

I think I might know her. (Laughter that morphs into a sort of sob.)
So I wrote a story about that night. Of course, I fictionalized it. The next day, the job site was at the school, and I was sleeping on the floor in a sleeping bag. I was taping, and the mud on the walls wasn't dry enough for me to do what I had to do. In other words, I had the morning off. So I sat at this little desk in this school out in Chignik Bay and wrote on a yellow legal pad the story of a woman sitting around a table playing poker with a bunch of guys like us. Actually, they were slobs, uneducated guys… like us.

Did *Playboy* take it because it was sexual?
Yeah. It was the perfect story for *Playboy*. It was unusual because it was a female main character.

You've been able to pull that off a few times.
Once or twice. So my agent called me and said that Alice Turner—the longtime fiction editor at *Playboy*—wants to know if you're open to suggestions. I said, yeah, fine. So she mailed me the manuscript—this was in the days before email.

Was it marked up?
It had like miles of strikeouts. Whole Xs across pages. If they would have gone any further it would have been haiku. I saved it. I use it in my lectures now to show students how tough some editors can be. I say, "You guys get upset when *I* mark up your stuff? Well, this is what happens in the real world."

What were these rivers like in the '80s?
Well, there were a lot of kings. But that's come and gone. There were times since then when they had to shut the river down because there were so few kings. I hope it comes back again, but it's real poor now.

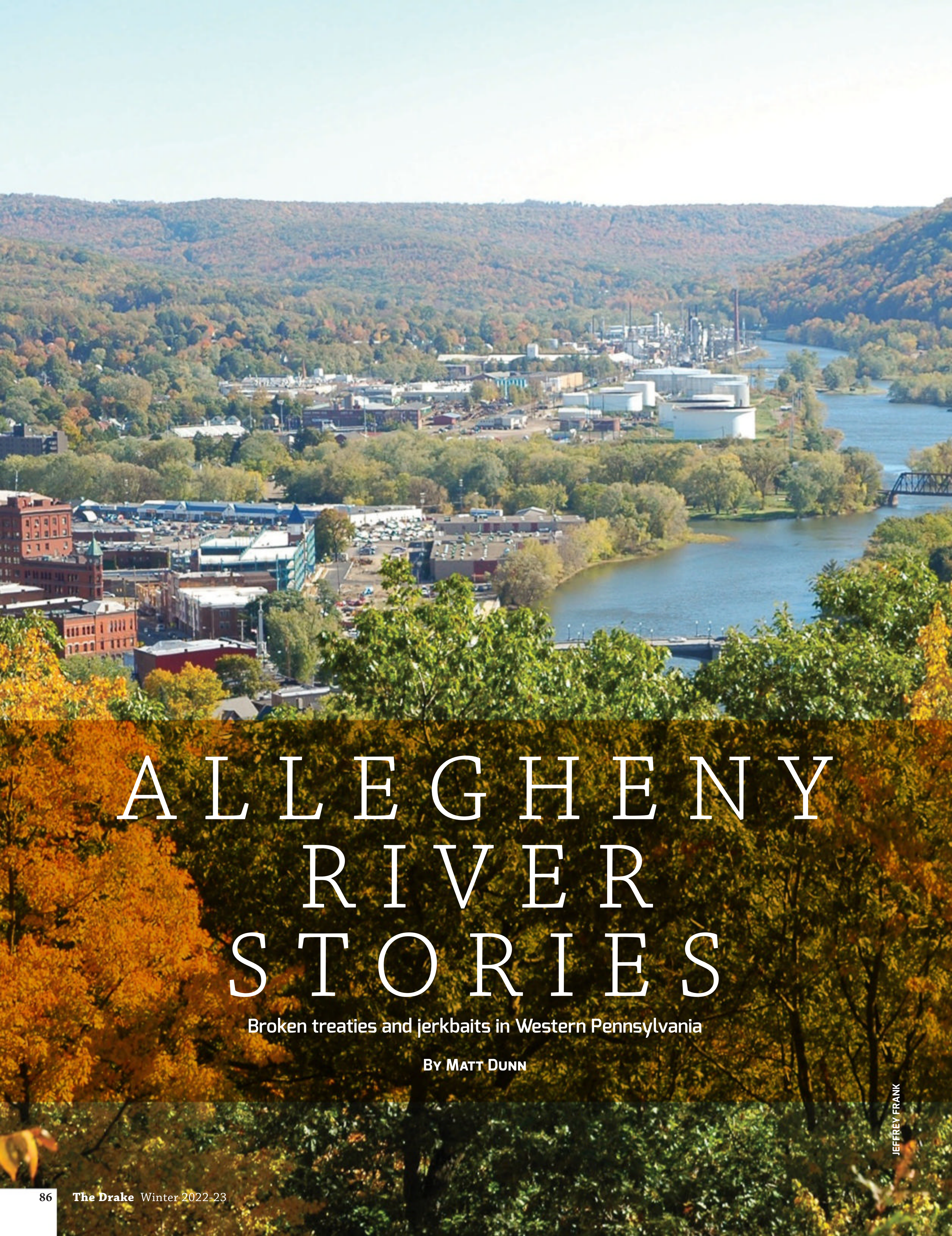
Yeah?
Yeah. But that's state-wide, not just these rivers. I think the trawlers are massacring them out there in the deep water. My theory is that, because the kings run deep in the ocean, they swim with the herring and the cod. So the pollock trawlers are down deep—they're killing kings. They're not killing sockeye, because the sockeye numbers are breaking records everywhere. The sockeye are on the surface feeding on krill.

That's a bummer.
You can look up the number, but one year the commercial fishery had to keep track of the kings that they killed and threw overboard—they killed like 160,000 in one year. And those are just the ones that they admitted to. If nobody's watching, guess how many kings they're killing?

You're trying to make your fishing writing as literary as you can get away with. Are you going to keep going?
My problem is that I don't have any intentions. When I sit down to write a story, I just go with it. Then I look at it and realize, after I've been at it for awhile, what I'm going to do with it. This might take days or weeks, because I'm really slow. I don't know if it's going to be for a fishing magazine or not. Like that story "Mammoth"—I intended that for a food magazine. And then it turned out to be more about the couple. They're not always suitable for fishing magazines. And they're not always going to be suitable for the literary mags, because if you have a fish in your story, forget it. The literaries won't touch it. Usually, if you have a rod or a shotgun you're not going to get into a literary magazine. Maybe not so much today, but in the '80s it was terrible. All I ever wanted to do was write short stories.

> "I WASN'T TAKING ADJUNCT PAY TO TEACH PUNCTUATION TO HOCKEY PLAYERS WHEN I COULD MAKE TWO GRAND A WEEK HANGING WALLPAPER."

We didn't catch any kings on the Ninilchik. We drove back to Homer in the drizzle. At Fat Olives we each ordered a slice and a salad. We talked about catch-and-release fishing and the future of writing programs. One of the waitresses recognized Rich from a writer's workshop taught years ago. She wanted to talk to him about her writing. She didn't think he remembered her, but of course he did. He asked her if she was still at it. And though I'm usually slow in these situations, I recognized the sacred bond between teacher and student. I knew enough to excuse myself and give them some space. I went outside and stood in the rain while Rich and his student discussed the shape of fiction, and how to make the endings sing.



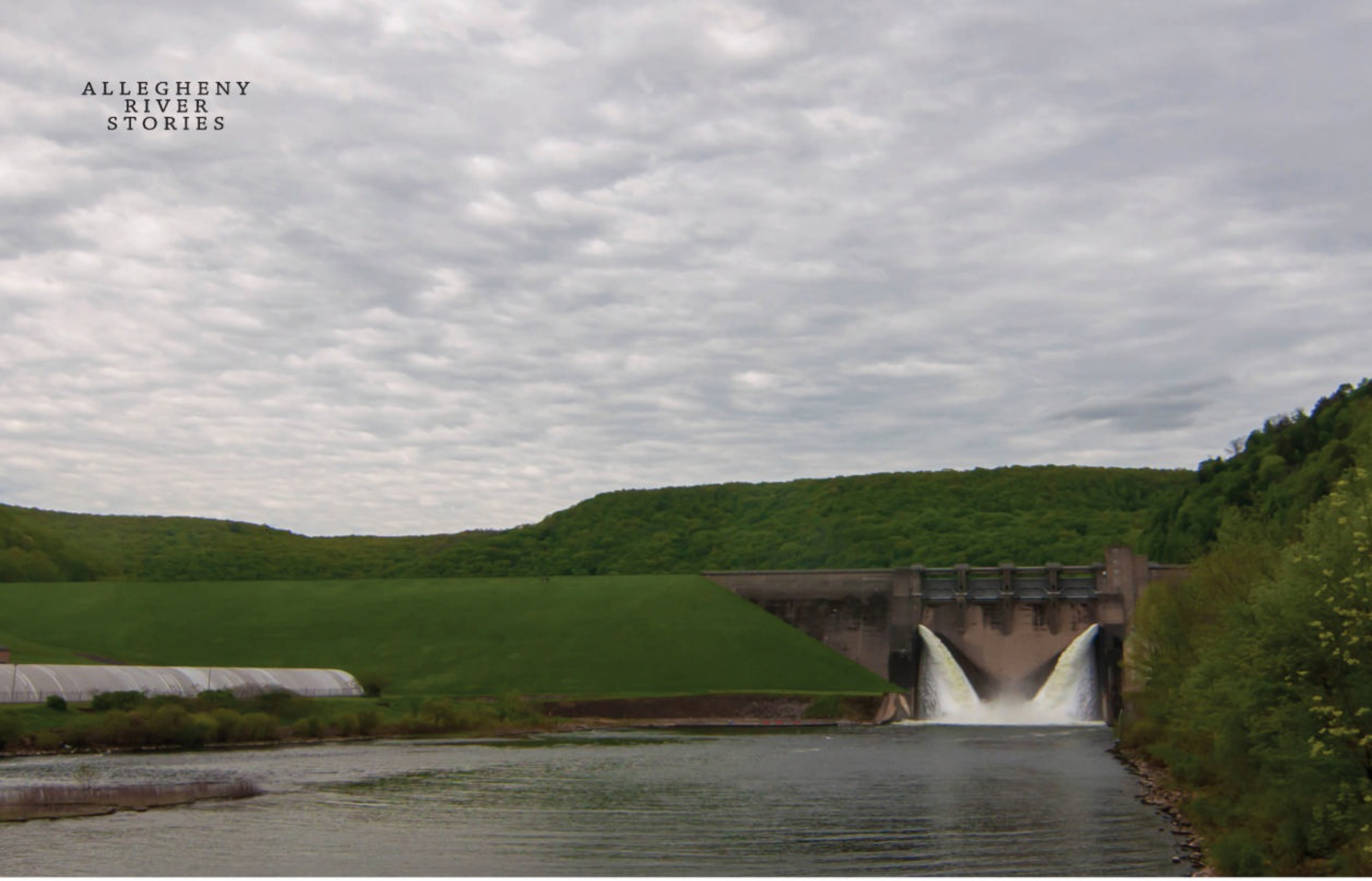
ALLEGHENY RIVER STORIES

Broken treaties and jerkbaits in Western Pennsylvania

By Matt Dunn

JEFFREY FRANK

THE ALLEGHENY RIVER AND WARREN, PENNSYLVANIA.



THE START OF THE TAILWATER SECTION BELOW KINZUA DAM ON THE ALLEGHENY RIVER IN WARREN COUNTY, PA. KINZUA IS ONE OF THE LARGEST DAMS IN THE EASTERN UNITED STATES.

WOODS NORTH

My wife, Jess, grew up behind the West End levee in Warren, Pennsylvania. The Allegheny River runs along the base of this levee, and the river here is scalloped with gravel bars and boulders and fishes well for smallmouth in the summer. I fished there a lot before I met Jess on the Internet. This is pretty far from the good trout water, so take it with a grain of salt, but my wife's brother, Joe, claims he caught the biggest trout of his life there on a rooster tail.

Jess' dad, Joseph “Pittsy” Muscaro, lived in Warren his entire life, in three different houses on Pine Street. His dad's parents came from Italy in the 1880s and his mom came in 1907, when she was 3. A combination of affordable transatlantic passage, poverty in southern Italy, and an industrial complex that needed laborers for mines, mills, and railroads, drove a period of intense chain migration to Western Pennsylvania. The west end of Warren is still significantly Italian—the Barardis, Barones, Muscaros, Thomasonis, and Girardis still live there—and you can still eat at Chiodo's Ferro Cucina.

My wife's paternal grandfather enlisted in the Army when he was 18 and fought in WWI. When he was discharged he took a job at Struthers Wells, a metal-fabrication company in Warren that made equipment for the first successful oil well in the world, which opened in 1859 in nearby Titusville. At its peak in the 20th century, the Struthers Wells plant employed more than five thousand people in Warren and Crawford counties, including many who walked a few blocks to work every day from the west end of Warren.

Companies like Quaker State and Pennzoil betray the birthplace of American petroleum. While the plant in Warren closed in 1993, and nearby Bradford has always been the capital of Pennsylvania petroleum, Warren keeps the oil fire burning at United Refining, averaging 70,000 barrels a day to supply your local Kwik Fill with that thirst-quenching 87 octane.

The refinery sprawls for more than a mile along the north bank of the Allegheny, at the end of the good trout water. There are two flares on the river, a low pressure and a high. The high-pressure flare sits on its own island just below “Refinery Rapid,” surrounded by “WARNING: DO NOT STOP” signs. The flare is fifty feet tall and ten feet wide and occasionally emits an apocalyptic rolling storm of fire and black smoke. The low-pressure flare is located adjacent to the plant's warm water discharge; it's a good place to fish in the winter.

On March 18, 1936, the Allegheny crested in

UNITED REFINERY'S HIGH-PRESSURE FLARE, ON AN ISLAND OF THE ALLEGHENY.

MATT DUNN

Pittsburgh at forty-six feet—twenty-one feet over flood stage. Forty-seven people died in the city, 135,000 were left homeless, and 60,000 steel workers were laid off. In today's dollars, the flood caused about $5 billion in damage. This was also the flood—after generations of floods—that finally spurred federal action. Congress passed the Flood Control Acts of 1936 and 1938, authorizing funding for a "dam at Warren PA" and eight others in the upper Allegheny watershed.

The Allegheny below Kinzua Dam—the "dam at Warren"—is a big, riffle-pool-riffle river, several hundred feet wide. Kinzua translates as "fish on a spear" in the Seneca Iroquois language. The pools here are called eddies, and the topography and geology of the riffles creates large islands, some as large as a hundred acres, around which the river braids. The river flows mostly through the beech, maple, black cherry, and hemlock uplands of the Allegheny Plateau on its way to Pittsburgh, where it meets the Monongahela to become the Ohio, eventually joining the Mississippi just south of Cairo, Illinois. The river creates the northern and western boundaries of the half-million-acre Allegheny National Forest, and for eighty-seven miles is also a federally designated Wild and Scenic River. This section includes the Allegheny Islands Wilderness—one of America's smallest at just 372 acres spread across seven islands.

The good trout water on the Allegheny starts below the dam and continues for about nine miles to the confluence with Conewango Creek in Warren. It's unlikely this section had resident trout historically, and if it did, they were brook trout. These are browns, and cold water below the dam allows them to survive year-round, maybe even spawn, and get really big. Small brown trout are rare here; fish over twenty inches are more common than fish under twenty. This isn't a "numbers" trout fishery. The state stocks fingerling browns every year, but most get eaten immediately. In addition to trophy browns, the Allegheny has strong wild (and native) populations of muskie, walleye, and smallmouth.

While the river does have some decent hatches, the best way to catch the biggest browns here is to use threaded minnows and drink Busch. If you're too good for that (I am) and you don't want to pay $10 for this magazine (I don't), then the next best way is jerkbaits and Yuengling. But if you're feeling particularly sophisticated (which I often do) then you can grind it out with streamers and IPA. You'll get way drunker and catch far fewer fish, but you'll feel some kind of way about it.

My friend Paul and I fished the river recently at the ideal level, with perfect color and temps. We threw big streamers for five hours without moving a fish. We finally relented and Paul picked up the jerkbait rod and put a twenty-inch trout in the net in under ten minutes. It was simultaneously disheartening and hopeful: Flyfishing doesn't work, but at least there are fish here that can be caught.

I'm not typically a glass-half-full guy when it comes to fishing. Plus, I was tired after throwing heavy streamers on sink-tips with an 8-weight all morning. Nevertheless, Paul's fish lifted my spirits, so we ripped back upriver in the jet boat for a second pass through the Grade A Water. I tied on a Swimmy Jimmy, one of the first generation of what I call "jerkbait streamers." Its deerhair head is shaved down into a wide, flat surface perpendicular to the hook, and the shank is bent down and to the side to make it dig and dive erratically with each strip. Kind of like a jerkbait. It's still a wad of feathers and hair that's hard to keep in the zone, but it swims okay. It is most certainly not the black-hearted, pure-killing, engineered plastic-and-metal machine-of-death that is a jerkbait. But it'll do.

I proceeded to fish that fly through the Grade A Water. I cast it expertly, mended it expertly, and stripped and jerked it violently and also expertly. It danced and darted and bobbed and weaved as much like a jerkbait as possible. I powered through the cramps in my shoulder and hand. "You want fucking jerkbaits, here's a fucking jerkbait," I mumbled under my breath as I fished. "Take this and choke on it, you assholes." I cursed the trout and I cursed Rapala and I never caught a fish.

WHILE THE RIVER DOES HAVE SOME DECENT HATCHES, THE BEST WAY TO CATCH THE BIGGEST BROWNS HERE IS TO USE THREADED MINNOWS AND DRINK BUSCH.

The Onondowahgah (Seneca) are members of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy. The Seneca are also known as "Keepers of the Western Door'' because they are the westernmost member of the Iroquois. They historically occupied the area from Canandaigua Lake to the Genesee River in what is now Western New York, before expanding south and west into Pennsylvania in the 1600s. In 1965, the Kinzua Dam flooded nine-thousand acres of Seneca sovereign lands, which the U.S. government had removed them from, in violation of the longest-standing U.S. treaty still in force at the time—the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua.

The historical Iroquois have been described as imperialist, expansionist, and warlike. In her book, *Reflections in Bulloughs Pond*, historian Diana Muir wrote, citing three archaeological studies that looked at the movement of Iroquois artifacts east and north prior to European contact: "The Iroquois, with agricultural skills, an ever expanding population, and a warlike culture, brushed the hunting-and-gathering Algonquin out of their path."

The arrival of European migrants and access to international markets threw fuel on the Iroquois' already burning fire. For nearly a hundred years, beginning in the early 17th century, the Iroquois allied mostly with the English and Dutch, fighting for and nearly securing a fur-trading monopoly with Europe. The Iroquois, whose populations were decimated by European diseases like smallpox, also went to war in order to take captives as replacements for their lost relatives. These are known as the Beaver Wars, during which the Iroquois expanded significantly, ultimately claiming a vast swath of land that included most of the lower Great Lakes, Midwest, and Mid Atlantic, and extended into what is now Virginia, Kentucky, Illinois, and Michigan.

During this period they assimilated and effectively exterminated several groups of indigenous people including the Erie, Wenro, Neutral, Petun, and Susquehannocks. It's hard to overestimate the power of the Iroquois at the peak of their expansion and influence, which ebbed and flowed during the 18th century and ultimately ended with England's defeat in the American Revolutionary War. The 1783 Treaty of Paris drew the boundaries of the new United States, and did not explicitly recognize any British-allied Iroquois land claims.

A rapid succession of treaties and land sales substantially decreased the Iroquois territory following the American Revolution. The second Treaty of Fort Stanwix, in 1784, negotiated the transfer of nearly the entire northwestern third of modern Pennsylvania to the newly formed United States. A series of other agreements left the Seneca, just prior to Kinzua Dam being built in 1960, with about seventy square miles spread across three reservations and the Cornplanter grant—the last Native American settlement in Pennsylvania.

Cornplanter, or Gyantwachia, a Seneca war chief and diplomat, fought with the French at the Battle of the Monongahela in 1755, at Fort Duquesne, the location of present day Pittsburgh. George Washington was also present at this battle, fighting on the British side. Cornplanter and Washington would meet again under very different circumstances in 1790 in Philadelphia to discuss relations between the Seneca and the new "United States of America."

While Kinzua Dam was approved in 1938, social and political resistance from the Seneca and their allies delayed its construction. They filed lawsuits in federal court, testified in front of Congress, and proposed fully engineered, alternative flood-control projects in an attempt to stop it. But the well-organized business interests in Pittsburgh, with their powerful political allies, who were at this point more concerned with the city's image as a decaying post-industrial blight than moving the needle on flood control, proved too formidable a force.

In March of 1956 the town of Warren experienced the most devastating flood in its history. The images from the event, and cost associated with it, were easily used as justification for the dam project, though it's unclear if the Kinzua Dam would have

PIPER VANORD

TIDIOUTE OVERLOOK IN THE ALLEGHENY NATIONAL FOREST, SHOWING COURSON ISLAND, PART OF THE ALLEGHENY RIVER ISLANDS WILDERNESS AREA. THIS PORTION OF THE RIVER IS FEDERALLY DESIGNATED AS "WILD AND SCENIC."

THE AUTHOR'S FATHER-IN-LAW, JOSEPH "PITTSY" MUSCARO (IN WADERS), STANDING IN FRONT OF HIS HOUSE DURING THE 1956 FLOOD IN WARREN, PA.

COURTESY MUSCARO FAMILY

made a difference—most of the 1956 flooding came from the Conewango watershed. As a candidate, John F. Kennedy promised to reform Indian relations but failed to halt dam construction after becoming president. He sent condolences in a 1961 letter: "I have now had an opportunity to review the subject and it is not possible to halt the construction of Kinzua Dam after a long and exhaustive Congressional review, and after resolution by our judicial process of the legal right of the Federal Government to acquire the property."

The dam was controversial national news in the early 1960s, but Johnny Cash was too late to make a difference when he popularized the Peter La Farge song, "As Long As the Grass Shall Grow" in 1964. "It will drown the Indian graveyard, Cornplanter can you swim?"

In the summer of 2013, the year I met my friend Don, he came up from Pittsburgh with Bill from Johnstown in July. We floated for muskie and smallmouth on a section of the Allegheny below the trout water. Don rolled a muskie early in the day but didn't stick it. We caught a handful of good smallmouth on white streamers and olive buggers, and a few incidentals on muskie flies. The weather was hot and the river was low and we drank pale ale and porter and ate fried chicken and Mirabelle

THOUGH PRIMARILY A RIVER FOR BIG BROWN TROUT, THE ALLEGHENY ALSO HOLDS GOOD NUMBERS OF SMALLMOUTH.

MATT DUNN

plums in the shade of silver maples and sycamores.

Toward the end of the day we beached the boat to take a swim. Don's skin was glistening with sweat, and when he lowered himself into the river a rainbow-sheen slick was pulled off his body and slowly whirled into the current. I swung my bugger through the run below him and caught a fish. We laughed and said it probably counted as chumming.

Terry Pegula, the billionaire owner of the Buffalo Bills and the Buffalo Sabres, was born in northern Pennsylvania, the descendent of European immigrants. His business was founded in 1983 in the town of Allegany, on the Allegheny River in Cattaraugus County, N.Y., about two miles from the eastern edge of the Seneca Allegheny Reservation. Pegula profited immensely from natural gas development through hydraulic fracturing in the Marcellus Shale formation and in 2010 sold most of his assets to Royal Dutch Shell for nearly $5 billion dollars.

In 2021 Pegula demanded that a new stadium be built for the Bills, and that it be paid for with state and local tax dollars. He threatened to move the Bills to, gasp, Texas, if it didn't happen. The deal got done and people in Western New York grudgingly accepted this egregious corporate welfare because it kept the Bills in Buffalo.

Shortly after the announcement of the stadium's approval, at the end of March 2022, the State of New York froze the bank accounts of Seneca Nation, forcing them to pay nearly half a billion dollars in "late" state taxes on casino revenue, a perpetually fraught subject. The Nation paid, and New York Governor Kathy Hochul jubilantly announced that this money would be used to fund the majority of the state's $600 million share of the new stadium.

It was the ultimate political end-around for Hochul: The Bills stayed in Buffalo and the Seneca paid for the stadium.

A COMPARATIVELY SAFE SPOT FOR MISSOURI RIVER CARPING.

BRADY SCHWERTFEGER (2)

Bodies at Black Eagle

Carp and mortality in Montana BY BRADY SCHWERTFEGER

LIKE MOST DAYS in Great Falls, Montana, it was windy on Wednesday, February 19, 2014. Fifty-mile-an-hour gusts made the mid-thirties temps bite even harder than usual. Under mostly cloudy skies, authorities leaned over the rails above the Missouri River spillway at Black Eagle Dam, using long poles to break apart ice so they could reach the frozen body of 24-year-old Graham Macker. Nearly three months earlier, Macker had walked off from his pre-release program, escaping a manhunt of sheriff's deputies, police dogs, and a Homeland Security helicopter. But he did not escape the Missouri River.

I spent a lot of time in Great Falls as a kid. Seasonal stocking of nub-finned, pellet-fed fish destined for a cooler was the extent of the trout fishing in my native Austin, Texas, so the annual family road trips to Montana were compelling. My mother was born in Minot, North Dakota, but grew up in Great Falls. Specifically, Parkdale: three square blocks of government-subsidized housing, excessive streetlights, and dedicated 24-hour police surveillance made semi-famous by an episode of MTV's *True Life* documentary series: "I Live in the Projects."

After my grandfather died from a heart attack in a duck blind, my grieving grandmother left Minot for Great Falls with half a dozen kids in tow. My mother was 7 years old. The triplets were in preschool. They ended up in Parkdale, where they all lived in a two-bedroom apartment. It was a rough place to raise a family. Drug use, domestic disputes, and random acts of violence were the norm, occasionally with shots fired. The meek were wise to scurry along lest they be menaced, or roped into generalized vandalism like sling-shotting marbles at cars.

To break free from this (and the seven-person apartment where he was the only boy) my uncle, Tom, took to fishing. He'd ride his bike down to the Missouri, frequently with his friend Merlin, and spend hours exploring as far as their two wheels would take them. Because of the supposed danger and relative remoteness of the farther flung trails along the river, he'd never tell his mother exactly where he was going. His sisters generously didn't squeal.

Though not always accessible by bike, the entirety of "The Great Falls of the Missouri" was at his fingertips. Starting with Black Eagle Falls, eight or so notable features in this area offered great fishing—and still do. Giant Springs and the Roe River (all two-hundred feet of it) are just downstream, followed by Rainbow Dam and Rainbow Falls, Crooked Falls and Cochrane Dam, Ryan Dam and The Great Falls, and lastly, Morony Dam. Armed with flies, lures, and usually a tin of worms, Tom learned everything a kid could learn about the Missouri River's fishing idiosyncrasies, including some nauseating ones.

Just downstream from Giant Springs was a small ravine that Tom and Merlin had titled "Blood Creek." Until the nearby slaughterhouse shuttered in the mid-seventies, the creek ran red with dregs of the washaway, tinting the Missouri the same shade of scarlet. Carp stacked up here to feed on the grisly remains, and the two boys would catch them with treble hooks dressed in corn and marshmallows.

THIS BIG LANDSCAPE HAS PLENTY OF PLACES TO HIDE, TEMPORARILY.

With this image in mind, it might not be accurate to call it an angler's paradise, but for a 12-year-old kid it was a world of endless fascination and wonder. The stretch has rainbows, cutthroat, browns, and whitefish; channel cats and bullheads hold upstream by the water-treatment plant; pike, walleye, and sauger are scattered throughout; and sturgeon, paddlefish, goldeneye, and burbot provide unusual and uncommon fare. And yes, carp.

THE TURNOVER OF FAMILIES was high in Parkdale, with most only lasting about three years. My mother's family lasted four times that. After a dozen years of steady, blue-collar secretary work at the Social Security office (and a little government assistance), my Grandma Julie could finally afford to move the family out of Parkdale and buy a house around the block. My aunt lives there to this day.

It's not a rags-to-riches story, which are far less common than we're led to believe. If anything, it demonstrates the Weltschmerz of the American experience; the tale that our country's leaders tell the citizenry—that if you live right and save for a few years, you, too, can escape the trappings of poverty and welfare. What they don't tell you is that you'll just be moving across the street.

Addiction is like this, too. When he was a teenager, Graham Macker was featured in the HBO-affiliated documentary *Montana Meth*. Director Eames Yeates spent months following and filming active and recovering addicts across the state, getting first-hand recordings of users using, detailing their usage, hating themselves for it, but knowing no other path. Macker was only 16 and lived in Kalispell at the time. He talks about his athletic childhood and the rapid deterioration of his body; all the money he's wasted on drugs; his fear of needles, causing him to look the other way as his abettors injected him with fresh-cooked meth. Graham's friend Kenny sits with him in the hotel room, sadly waxing to the camera about what Graham has become.

The struggle with meth usage across the Western and Midwest states has been well documented. At one point, Montana ranked second in the nation for teenage and adult meth abuse. Organizations like the Montana Meth Project have conducted campaigns to curb the trend. Crackdowns from law enforcement have attempted to do the same. There is evidence to suggest that these efforts have been successful, or at least that meth usage has dropped, particularly with teens. But meth's presence in Montana cannot be ignored, and the drug's potency is such that one-time users are not the standard.

Graham got clean after filming, but only temporarily. In a follow-up interview with CBS in 2011, he admitted to not knowing what "normal" is. "We're doing a day at a time right now," he said. He was later charged with forgery and writing bad checks—likely related to a relapse—and subsequently violated parole. That's how he ended up at the pre-release in Great Falls. Every user interviewed in *Montana Meth* seemed to acknowledge that "recovering addict" was a permanent title. It never goes to past tense. You're forever adjacent to that person you once were.

SCOUTING FOR TAILS.

BRADY SCHWERTFEGER

In the river corridor starting just below the 9th Street Bridge, the water sits low and deep in the precipitous canyon it has carved over millennia, and it subsides only sporadically as it flows toward the Missouri River Breaks much farther downstream. Above Black Eagle Dam, the shoreline is brushy and steep, and the shallow zones quickly recede into the wide, murky river channel. As a result, the carping in this area is tough, but the narrowness of the flats also means the carp are much closer to shore. Soft feet and a good short game will get you what you're after. Below the falls, however, is where things really heat up.

Black Eagle Memorial Island and its flora and fauna are a favorite refuge of mine in all seasons, but particularly when the carp are active in skinny water. From the parking lot, a steel walking bridge takes you to the island itself. The roaring, threatening spillway kicks at and under you as you cross. The dam and impressive stepped falls mark the upper end of the south shore. Running the length of this side of the island is a tract of rocky shallows that, to the average eye, appears lifeless and devoid of fish. But the tailing fiend sees what it can provide, which is vulturine carp sifting through silt, leaving no boulder's edge unchecked in search of crustaceans, larvae, and generally edible detritus.

The flat top of the island and its looped walking trail sits fifteen or more feet above the water—a perfect spot to scan for feeding carp. It's like being in the top row of the bleachers at a football game. Your vantage lets you predict what might happen, and you can place yourself accordingly when you see it. Once you find a suitable target, you quietly skid down the bank and start spot-casting. Crayfish patterns are a must, along with other small streamers; anything that undulates. If you miss a fish, or the carp spook, no problem. Just climb back up and walk a bit downstream, there will be more. Best of all, there's virtually no competition.

This is how it's been since the 1960s. Aside from a bobber angler here or there, Tom didn't really encounter people around Black Eagle Dam and the surrounding area, despite it being "in town." These days, the hiking and biking trails along this stretch are much more robust, so you're more likely to find others participating in non-fishing activities. That wasn't the case back then. He would occasionally happen upon groups of people huddling suspiciously in the hills and ditches, but it was easy enough to just turn and head the other direction.

It wasn't so much these potentially dangerous people that kept Tom from sharing his whereabouts with my grandmother, it was the surroundings. The powerful flows, the vertical cliffs of crumbling rock and shale, the rattlesnakes. Tom handled these and more with the fearlessness of youth. Fording the river to reach a rock, or island, or the opposite shore. Suspending from ledges that would bring certain death were he to fall (which he almost did, on more than a few occasions). He didn't tell his mother, of course. If she didn't allow him to fish the fast water at Ryan Dam, she would have certainly prohibited the falls-hopping Tom did at Black Eagle. The river itself is indiscriminate and unforgiving.

Graham Macker isn't the only person to have passed at Black Eagle Dam in recent times. Just a year and a half after his body was found, Cory James Rosales was found dead in the same spot. Their cases and circumstances are eerily similar. Both had a troubled history, and both were walk-offs from the Great Falls Pre-Release Center not long before their bodies were reported above the dam. Cause of death in both cases was reported as accidental drowning.

On April 23, 2018, Brittney Roberts was seen in the water

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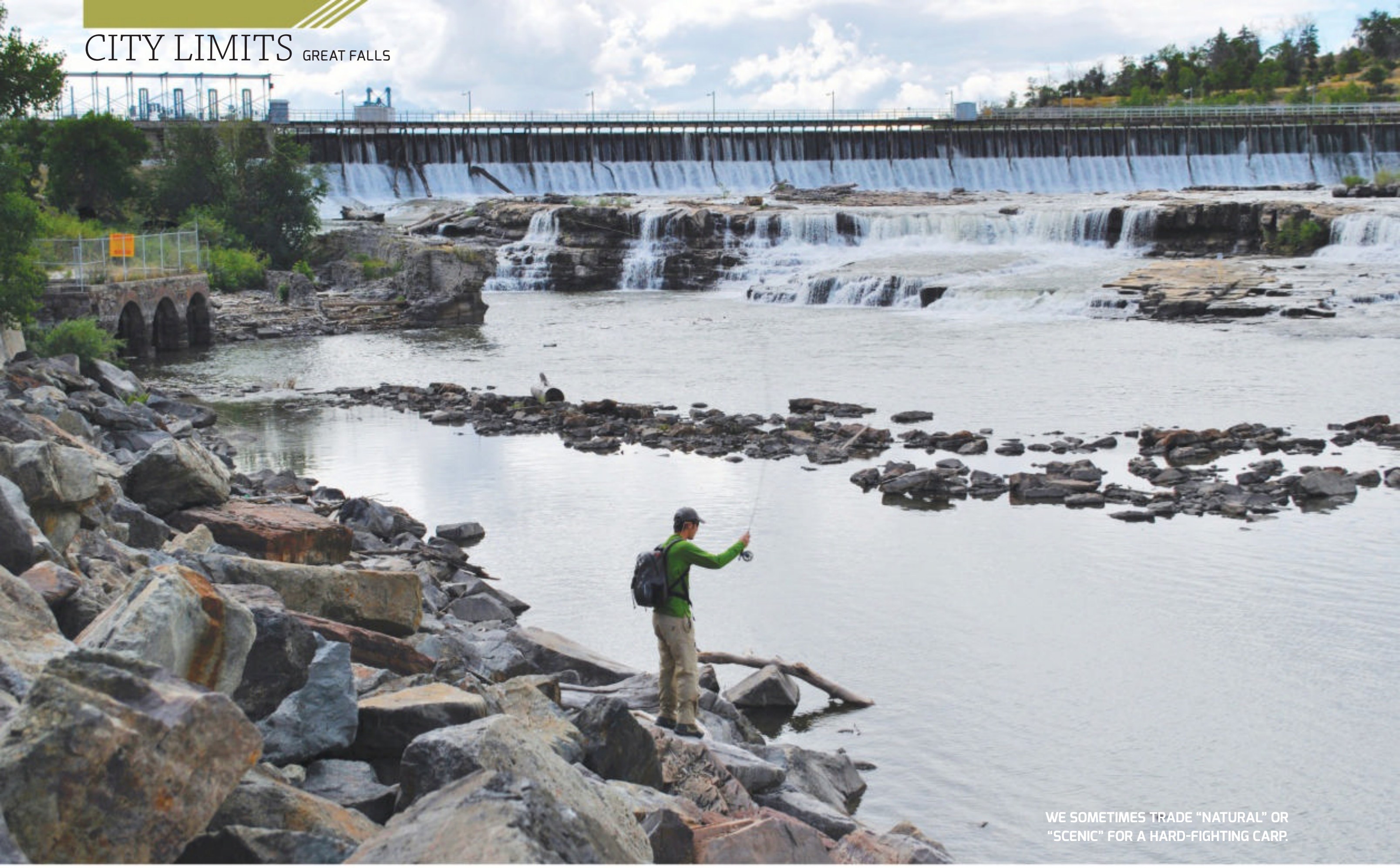

WE SOMETIMES TRADE "NATURAL" OR "SCENIC" FOR A HARD-FIGHTING CARP.

above Black Eagle Dam at a landmark on the River's Edge Trail—just down the street from the Pre-Release Center. Minutes later, dam workers saw her struggling in the water entering the spillway. They were unable to assist her due to the strong current, and she passed through the dam. She was missing for six weeks until workers at Ryan Dam found her body, ten miles and three dams downstream from where she was last seen alive. She left behind an 18-month-old child and a fiancé.

There is a long-established desire from anglers for a pristine environment surrounding the waters we visit. Not solely in natural terms, but in the emotive quality as well. Industrial capitalism is fundamentally at odds with wildness and what we perceive nature to be. Those of us who make a habit of fishing in urban areas know that the pervasive spread of humankind necessitates that these two things coexist. The largemouth bedding in the golf-course pond knows this. As do the carp sucking down french fries kicked from the restaurant-patio overhang, and the amberjack hunting baitfish around offshore oil rigs.

It is vain to think we can avoid confrontations with death outside of the venues we've designated, simply because that's how we'd prefer it to be. Acting like cemeteries and funeral homes are the only places we must reckon with loss is ignoring obvious dangers about our planet, many of which we have created. Flattened animals wild and domestic litter the streets we drive. No place is spared this stamp, including our favorite fishing holes.

At the conclusion of *Montana Meth*, Graham's mother, Wendy, is asked how it all ends. Her son sits dispirited at the kitchen table behind her. She looks back at him as if searching for some hint.

"I don't know," she answers flatly. Seven years later his body is found under an ice shelf.

It's tempting in retrospect to hear these words as some ominous admission, as the resignation of a parent who is tired, who knows that her child's soul is now burdened with the possibility—perhaps promise—of addiction and the perils and strain this entails.

But really, none of us know. Uncertainty about the future is not just a product of an unsettled life, it's an essential element of the human experience. Clairvoyance is not our sixth sense, so we resort to forming predictions, often faulty, that are restricted by the limits of our imaginations and our aversion to picturing undesirable fates. You can't predict what you can't imagine.

Maybe you're out for a relaxing day on the lake, when suddenly your motor won't start near the top of a dam and you and your boat get sucked sixty feet down a spillway and you wash ashore half a mile down, wrapping a kiddie pool around your naked body because your clothes were ripped clean off, knocking on a stranger's door asking to use their phone. Maybe you're not so lucky.

How does it all end? "I don't know" is the only right answer. The best we can do is accept this and return to the places that make us feel something. We adopt postures of reverence in settings of tribute because it feels proper, and because we value honor in this world. But this respect is not a limited commodity, and we employ much less of it than we're capable of. The waters we fish deserve this treatment, which should be easy, given our propensity to spiritualize them. But we also owe it both to ourselves and to those no longer with us—people and places alike.

BRADY SCHWERTFEGER

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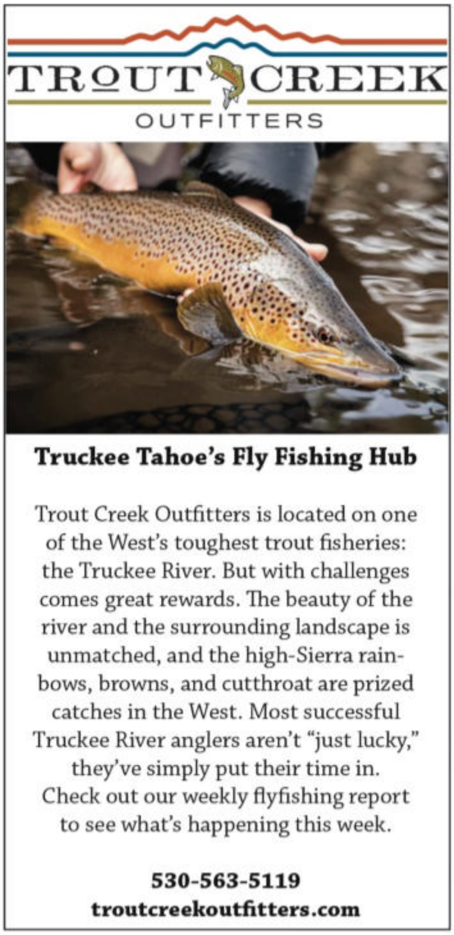

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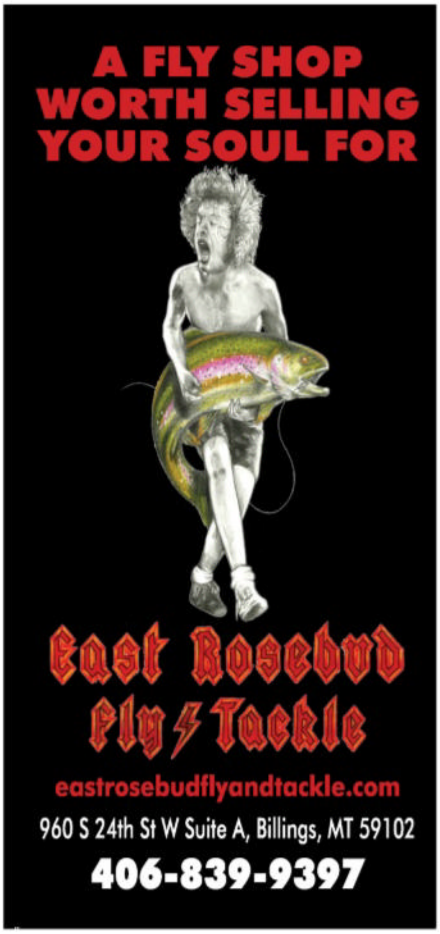

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PERMIT FISHING AT NO NAME MAY REQUIRE GETTING WET.

No Name Lodge

Is Puerto Rico the next great permit destination?

BY JOSEPH EVANS

ALMOST DUE NORTH of Caracas, Venezuela, with the Dominican Republic to the west and the British Virgin Islands to the east, lies relatively unexplored Puerto Rico. The flyfishing rumor mill began churning out reports this past spring about what South Florida boys Cooper Beckett and Matt Pourbaix had cooking down in southwestern P.R.—the next unknown hotspot for permit and tarpon lovers to pre-spend their 2022 tax refund.

Pourbaix had spent six years exploring the Puerto Rican fishery starting in 2013, living there while his then-girlfriend now-wife was attending medical school. He convinced Beckett to join him on a scouting mission in January 2022. After a month of searching, they'd seen enough big tarpon, schools of bones, and tailing permit to know it could work. But it was a later permit trip that convinced them they'd found something truly special.

The two had heard an octopus fisherman talking about seeing "*mucho palometo*" on one of the atolls. Armed with only an inflatable SUP and a sub-par rental boat, Beckett and Pourbaix went searching for proof. Shortly after dropping off Pourbaix on the first flat, Beckett received a breathless a call. "Cooper! They are tailing everywhere," Pourbaix said. "It's nuts!"

As they continued exploring the area, they came across habitat and sea life that made the permit sightings far less surprising: an abundance of bait and birds, octopus and nurse sharks, stingrays and barracuda, and a seemingly endless amount of crabs. While the number and variety of crabs was one of the most promising signs, perhaps most vital was the topography, revealing flats with aggressive drop-offs that would draw larger permit looking to forage along the reef. Over the ensuing weeks, Beckett and Pourbaix eventually found permit on nearly every reef-adjacent flat they fished.

The best part? It seems some aggressive tailing is often required for the permit to find their meal. Cuts and gashes on their raw, pink lips indicate a permit's efforts to secure their food by plucking it from this labyrinth of reef. Further evidence was found when olive-colored crab patterns were proven to be the most successful.

"Out of everywhere in the world I've fished for permit," says Pourbaix, "I've never experienced so many tailing fish, with so many of them being large ones."

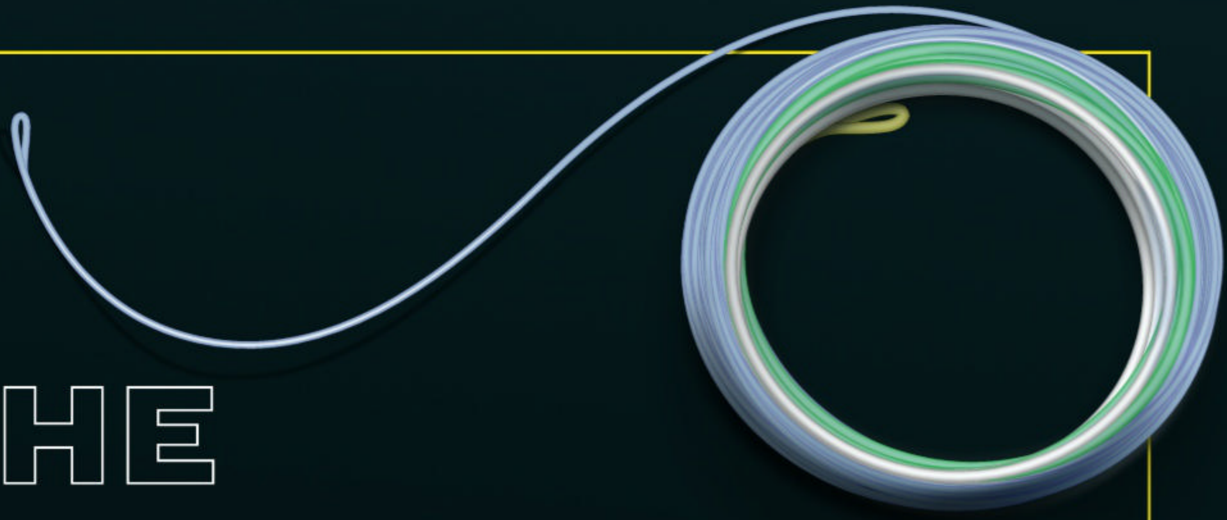
Lest this sound like suspect promotional lingo, it's worth noting that this is not Beckett and Pourbaix's first experience with lodge ownership. They are co-owners (with others) of Cayo Francis, on Belize's Ambergris Caye. And both are quick to remind potential No Name guests that these *are* still permit, and for every one that's come unbuttoned over a sandy bottom, ten have broken free when they have a reef to leverage in the fight. Not only could your fly snag some coral in the middle of your shot, but waves will be crashing, so the permit you spotted a half-second ago with its back out of the water will suddenly disappear. Once hooked, they'll head for deep water on the *other* side of the drop-off, and in the age-old battle of coral head versus 20-pound fluoro, you lose.

Your guide will run down the flat trying to herd your permit toward the forgiving sand, but if that's unsuccessful, his push-pole becomes your leader prop. Some guides may even swim out to grab your permit. All of which makes the reward of catching one feel that much sweeter.

There've been local sightings of smaller permit in schools, a promising sign that populations around the small town of Boqueron should continue to grow. Nevertheless, the fishery is primarily casting to large singles or small groups. Old fish mean smart fish, so pack your A-Game.

No Name Lodge is not a singular location, building, or fishery, but a business model of "fun, fast, and flexible" that Beckett and Pourbaix are using as they continue to explore and expand. No Name is welcoming guests for the 2023 season, accommodating six anglers per week in Marina Boquerón, a lively harbor town that is walking distance to the beach, as well as an exciting collection of local bars and restaurants. And since most of us forget: Puerto Rico is a U.S. Territory, so no passports required.

JOSEPH EVANS (2)



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